

Miri Mikawa
Kasumi Nagi

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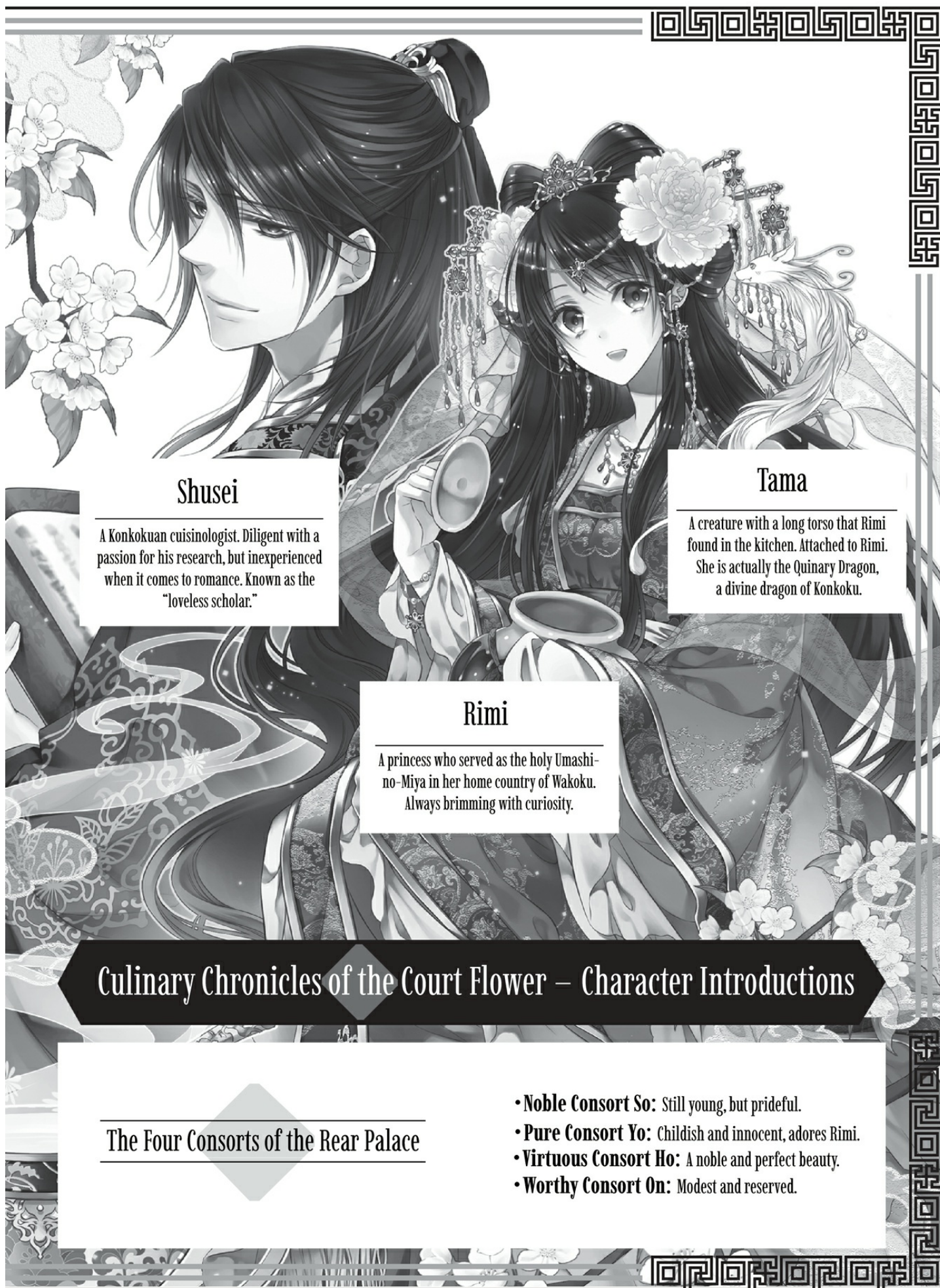
*Culinary
Chronicles
of the Court
Flower*



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Shusei

A Konkoku cuisineologist. Diligent with a passion for his research, but inexperienced when it comes to romance. Known as the “loveless scholar.”

Tama

A creature with a long torso that Rimi found in the kitchen. Attached to Rimi. She is actually the Quinary Dragon, a divine dragon of Konkoku.

Rimi

A princess who served as the holy Umashi-no-Miya in her home country of Wakoku. Always brimming with curiosity.

Culinary Chronicles of the Court Flower – Character Introductions

The Four Consorts of the Rear Palace

- **Noble Consort So:** Still young, but prideful.
- **Pure Consort Yo:** Childish and innocent, adores Rimi.
- **Virtuous Consort Ho:** A noble and perfect beauty.
- **Worthy Consort On:** Modest and reserved.



Jotetsu

A military officer who serves
as Shohi's bodyguard.



Hakurei

An enchantingly beautiful eunuch.
Serves Shohi directly.



Shohi

The emperor of the great empire
of Konkoku. Cruel and heartless.

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Shusei removed his cloak and changed from his traveling clothes into a shenyi. From the height of the sun, he knew there was a bit of time before he needed to make his move. He collected the papers from his desk, stacked them neatly, and put them in a box.

The box was tightly packed with all the notes he'd written on cuisinology since coming to the Ho House. As he closed the lid, his hand lingered there reluctantly. After a moment, he took his hand away and looked around the room. There was a loneliness in how precisely arranged it was.

Bamboo leaves rustled outside the open window. Shusei closed his eyes and let the sound wash over him.

I'm not as upset as I feared I'd be.

Sensing someone's presence, Shusei opened his eyes. It was his grandfather, Ho Neison, standing outside the room. The old man entered with a satisfied grin.

"Well done, Shusei! I've heard from Mars. Just as you asked three days ago, the chief general and the Minister of Justice began moving this morning. Everything seems to be going smoothly," Neison explained.

"Do we know how many of the bureaucrats have been pushed into action?" Shusei asked.

"About one-third of them, I'm told. The soldiers stationed around the capital will surely follow the chief general's lead as well. Our military's might will be overwhelming."

"One-third of the bureaucrats... That's less than I anticipated. It might not be enough. I also didn't expect Shu Kojin to return to His Majesty's side. If we want to embolden more of them, a harder push may be required."

"Pardon the intrusion, my lord."

A man had appeared in the doorway, kneeling. He was dressed as a servant, but his body was sinewy and his eyes were sharp. Neison gave the man a curious look.

"A spy I'm employing," Shusei explained as he approached the newcomer.

“Tell me, what is the state of the palace?”

“The chief general, Minister of Justice, and the bureaucrats are assembling in the Hall of New Harmony. It appears His Majesty has returned to the palace,” the spy reported.

“And the letter I left with you before I departed for Koto?”

“A trusted contact is delivering it. If all goes well, it should arrive the day after tomorrow.”

Hearing that put the scholar at ease.

“Excellent work. Leave us,” Shusei ordered. The spy stood and departed.

“What’s this about a letter?” Neison asked.

“Just a necessary step toward an aggressive position. Nothing to worry about,” the scholar said, turning back to face his grandfather with a smile. “For now, I’m heading to the Hall of New Harmony. I need to make the final push.”

“Is that right? Well, go on, then. Lead our house to glory.”

Shusei bowed and departed. As he walked, eyes focused firmly forward, his body was tense with both anxiety and resolve.

Things are finally starting. The flames will flicker, then dance, then erupt. All by my hand.

Chapter 1: The Hall of New Harmony Trembles

I

I wonder what's happening in the palace.

Rimi and Shohi's carriage had been driving day and night to get them back from Koto to Annei. The moment Shusei had departed the Autumn Garden—the Shu Family's second home—Shu Kojin had prepared carriages to return them to the palace. There were two carriages, lightweight and made for high speeds. Shohi and Rimi rode in one while Kojin and Ryo Renka took the other. Jotetsu, Kunki, and the rest of the guard escorted them on horseback.

Inside the violently bouncing cart, Shohi had been sitting silently for the entire journey. Rimi was stroking Tama, who sat curled atop her lap. The consort could sense Shohi's urgency, anger, and sadness.

Shohi, Kojin, and Renka had all agreed they needed to return to the capital without delay. If Shusei had spoken the truth and dissent was spreading among the bureaucrats, potentially leading to a call for the emperor's abdication, then they needed to put a stop to it immediately. Any sort of delay could mean irreparable harm.

Rimi was worried as well, but talking about it would only add to Shohi's worries. Instead, she tried to encourage the emperor to eat something, like the dried figs that Mrs. Yo had sent with them. But Shohi refused all her offerings.

I suppose it's no surprise he's not hungry.

Rimi tucked the figs into her pocket. She didn't have much of an appetite either.

Master Shusei, he...smiled.

The scholar had announced that Shohi's abdication was his personal wish. He'd said that he believed Shohi was suffering, meaning it was supposed to be for his benefit, as well as the stability of Konkoku. He'd treated it like a game of

wordplay and smiled. A bright smile, untainted by any hint of a lie.

It had been a blow to Rimi, and even now, removed from that moment, her heart was heavy with sorrow. It was like she'd watched Shusei die. He was still alive, of course, but the kind Shusei she'd loved was gone. He was something else now.

Meanwhile, Shohi was certainly angry with him for revealing himself as an enemy of the throne. He seemed anxious to fix things before they got worse. And like Rimi, he was probably enduring the grief of losing Shusei.

They stopped a few times at inn towns to switch horses, and each time, the sun was higher in the sky. As the sun climbed, they traveled faster, and it was midday when they arrived in Annei. Shohi's expression turned grim as the towering fortress walls of the palace came into sight. Rimi could feel the tension coil inside of her as well. Tama seemed to pick up on that as she perked her head up and looked at Rimi with concern.

"Don't worry, it's okay. We're back at the palace," the consort whispered as she stroked Tama's back.

The dragon looked from Rimi to Shohi. She then seemed to sense something and scurried under Rimi's skirt.

What are you sensing, Tama? And what was that before?

On the cliffside of the Autumn Garden, when Shusei had turned his back on Shohi, she felt like she'd heard Tama's voice.

"It is decided."

If that really had been the dragon's voice, what did it mean?

Kunki, who had been keeping pace with the convoy, pushed ahead and disappeared into the palace to announce their arrival. The carriage followed behind him at a somewhat slower pace. They entered the carriage field, and before they could even come to a full stop, the door flew open.

"Your Majesty, the ministers of Revenue and Rites are here to see you," Kunki said, the well-mannered bodyguard peering into the wagon with his shiny, boiled-egg face. He seemed pale, and there were dark rings beneath his eyes.

He'd been on a forced march from Annei to Koto and back, so he could hardly be blamed for looking tired. But true to form, both his demeanor and his voice were sharply controlled.

Behind the bodyguard, the two ministers were pacing quickly in their direction through the swirling dust of the carriage field. Shohi immediately descended from the vehicle, and Rimi followed.

"Hey, hey, c'mon. Why's everyone look so serious?" Jotetsu said jokingly, positioning himself behind Shohi.

"Something really is happening, isn't it?" the emperor asked the approaching ministers.

To Rihan, Minister of Revenue, and Jin Keiyu, Minister of Rites, stood before Shohi and bowed. Their gazes were stern as they raised their heads.

"Your Majesty, may I ask where you went?" Rihan asked, condemnation clear in his gravelly voice.

"I apologize for leaving without telling you. But I've returned with Kojin and our new Minister of Personnel," Shohi said.

"Chancellor Shu?" Keiyu said with wide eyes.

The second carriage arrived behind them, quickly stopping in a swirl of dust. The door opened, and Kojin and Renka disembarked. Rihan and Keiyu both looked stunned.

"What are you two looking at?" Kojin asked the ministers in his usual calm voice. "I've returned from my vacation, that's all."

"Chancellor Shu? And even Renka? How did you..." Keiyu murmured.

"I'll explain later," Shohi said, brushing off Keiyu's questions. He faced the pair with a sharp look. "I assume if you came here the moment you heard I'd returned, something's going on."

Rihan nodded gravely.

"Yes, Your Majesty. The chief general, the Minister of Justice, and nearly five hundred like-minded bureaucrats have assembled in the Hall of New Harmony. They desire a direct audience with you and your council."

“For what reason?” Shohi asked icily.

“It is an unbelievable outrage. The ungrateful lot are demanding your...your...” Rihan said, unable to finish the sentence.

“They want me to abdicate? So Shusei was right,” Shohi snorted. He turned back to face his chancellor. “Kojin, I’m going to meet with them. Do you approve?”

“I believe that is appropriate, Your Majesty.” Kojin nodded, then added, “Renka and I will come with you.”

“Rimi, I’m leaving for the Hall of New Harmony,” Shohi said, looking at her kindly. “You should rest. You must be tired after a bumpy night in a carriage.”

“No, I’m coming too!” Rimi blurted out and took a step toward the emperor. “I know I can’t do anything, but I don’t want to leave your side!”

The shock that this unfamiliar Shusei had inflicted on her wouldn’t pass in a single night. Her mind was still reeling from the sadness. Shohi had received the very same shock, and she knew just how hurt and shaken he felt. That was why she didn’t want to leave him. While knowing she could do nothing even if she was there, she could at least support him if it seemed like he might fall.

I can’t leave him at a time like this.

Shohi seemed able to read her pleading look, and he gave her a small smile.

“How could I say no to that?” he responded with a nod before turning to leave. Kojin, Renka, Rihan, and Keiyu all followed him. Rimi and Jotetsu joined them from behind.

With five hundred bureaucrats lined up and waiting, the Hall of New Harmony’s smooth stone floors could hardly be seen. At the forefront of the group was the Chief General of the Imperial Army, clad in a breastplate, and the Minister of Justice.

Rimi and Jotetsu were behind a thick curtain watching Shohi, who was sitting on his throne and fearlessly meeting the crowd’s stares.

“That son of a bitch general is wearing his armor. He’s here for war,” Jotetsu

grumbled.

It was probably an unsurprising show of force, considering they were demanding the emperor to abdicate.

But a direct demand for abdication without any show of regret or attempt to soften the blow was the most heinous act of disrespect an emperor could receive. Rimi wondered how Shohi would respond to that.

The emperor's gaze passed across the crowd, and while he scowled at the general's attire, he remained calmly seated on his throne. Though they'd only just returned from their journey, he'd managed to change into a plum-colored ceremonial robe. A silver dragon was embroidered across the shoulders, which reached down toward his chest.

"Now, of all times, you must be seen at your best," Kojin had said, encouraging Shohi to take the time to change his clothes. It would put the emperor in an even worse situation if he was seen as sloppy and disorganized.

Rihan and Keiyu took places below the throne. Kojin and Renka came to stand beside them.

Surprised whispers rippled through the crowd at the chancellor's arrival. Shusei had spread rumors that Kojin had turned his back on Shohi, so seeing him stand with the emperor now likely came as a shock.

The chief general and Minister of Justice, however, were utterly unmoved.

"You requested an audience with me, so I have come. What is this about?" Shohi asked. His voice resounded well through the hall, which was three times a person's height.

The chief general stepped forward. In his hand was a roll of paper, which he unfurled on the floor. It was an endless list of bureaucrats' names, signed in ink.

Rihan and Keiyu looked annoyed, while Kojin looked at the scroll in disdain. Renka smirked.

"We present our Letter of Compact. Contained are our names and the names of all those who agree with us," the Minister of Justice, a man of small build, said as he stepped forward.

“Letter of Compact? What is that?” Rimi asked, looking up at Jotetsu. The term was unfamiliar.

“It’s a petition, basically,” Jotetsu spat. “A list of all the people who’d love to see His Majesty abdicate.”

If they had something like that ready, it meant they’d probably been carefully preparing this for a long time. If Shusei had ordered this, then his attention to detail was frightening.

“And what is this about?” Shohi repeated calmly while looking at the Letter of Compact. “Get to the point” was what it seemed like he wanted to say.

“We wish for you to abdicate the throne. Forgive our rudeness, but it is our unanimous opinion that you lack the age and grace to lead our empire. We desire a new emperor, one more fitting for the role,” the Minister of Justice announced. The look in his eyes was sharp.

Shohi continued to stare at the Letter of Compact with a blank expression, seeming to completely ignore the speech. But after a moment, he lifted his gaze and looked across the crowd.

“You are right. This is rude,” the emperor said as he began to stand. He glared at the present bureaucrats from in front of his throne. “I understand your message. But do you understand, I wonder? This is an act of rebellion. It is an act with consequences. There is still time for you to undo this. I don’t know what sort of ridiculous rumors you’ve fallen for, but as you can see, Shu Kojin stands with me as chancellor. Further, Ryo Renka has agreed to fill the vacant Minister of Personnel position.”

At that, Renka bowed. Kojin took a step forward.

“Our rude friend claimed a moment ago that His Majesty lacks grace,” the chancellor began, his voice rich with contempt. “But have you all forgotten? Who granted our country’s hundred-year wish of opening trade with Saisakoku? He stands before you. He did what no one else could. He lacks grace? He who has done what no emperor has done in a hundred years? According to whom? I am here because I resolved to serve His Majesty. So too is the Minister of Personnel. His Majesty’s reign is stable, and you fools want to rebel against him?”

The assembled bureaucrats began to exchange looks.

“There is still time. Leave, and I will forget this happened,” Shohi added.

“Thank him for his generosity, and forget your treasonous ideas!” Kojin barked, not wasting a moment.

Some bureaucrats took a step back and seemed on the verge of leaving. The crowd began to stir, seemingly beginning to lose heart.

Maybe they'll listen!

Rimi grasped the curtain tightly as hopeful expectation swelled inside her. Jotetsu had a grin as well.

“There’s no treason here!” called a voice brimming with confidence.

II

The voice came from the hall’s open entrance. A tall, slender young man stood there, illuminated from behind by the shining sun. It was Ho Shusei, master of the Ho House.

Master Shusei!

One look at his seemingly kind face sent a shiver down her spine.

I’m afraid of him.

He seemed kind on the outside. But he was a beast waiting to strike, hiding his razor claws and fangs. He had killed the kind, young cuisinologist she’d once known. It was a confusing feeling.

He killed the man I love.

Shusei bowed and entered the hall. He looked from left to right and smiled at people as he slowly worked his way through the crowd.

“Chancellor Shu claims His Majesty is responsible for opening trade with Saisakoku, ignoring all the work of the emperors who came before him. One could argue that a hundred years of labor has finally borne fruit, and he was simply lucky enough to be on the throne when it happened,” the scholar explained. “And the chancellor may claim that this is ‘treason’ and ‘rebellion,’

but he is gravely mistaken. You see, the Ryus are not the only family who can be named emperor.”

Shusei stopped in the very center of the crowd. His smile deepened.

“As we all know, Konkoku has two potential royal families: the Ryu House and the Ho House. Should the bureaucrats and the people not be allowed to choose which suits us more as their ruler, then? If the Ho House is not in their favor, then they should be allowed to choose the Ryu House. If not the Ryu House, then the Ho House. Therefore, this is no treason or rebellion. It’s a choice, isn’t it? The fact that both houses exist is an acknowledgment of that fact, wouldn’t you say? Heaven has granted you the right to seek a better ruler.”

Shusei’s confident demeanor and smile were calming the fidgeting bureaucrats. He began walking once more, pressing his way through the crowd.

“You’re simply asking for the choice Heaven has allowed you. That is why you placed your names on that Letter of Compact,” he concluded.

With Shusei’s specific wording, realization began dawning on the faces of the bureaucrats. Shohi could claim that all would be forgiven, but the names of those who had signed would come out eventually. They had no proof that it wouldn’t be used against them. They seemed to remember that now.

There could be no retreat. That was the feeling spreading as Shusei passed among the crowd. The knowledge seemed to embolden the people.

He’s so cunning.

Rimi was dumbfounded by his ability. He had eliminated any feelings of guilt the assembled may have had, and he had closed off any escape route for the timid. His confidence was also giving them relief and a sense of certainty.

The situation had turned on its head, all because of Shusei.

“Tch. Damn him,” Jotetsu hissed.

The scholar came to stand between the chief general and Minister of Justice, who both bowed to him: the bow of a servant to their master.

From in front of his throne, Shohi stared unflinchingly at Shusei. The emperor’s expression was plain, but one could see the faint outline of his tightly

clenched fists through his sleeves.

“Your Majesty, these people are simply making the choice that Heaven has afforded them. So I will make the demand on their behalf. Abdicate the throne,” Shusei said clearly and fearlessly.



How could he do this to His Majesty?!

Shusei and his methods deeply terrified Rimi. But after seeing the outlandish way that he was treating Shohi, anger was beginning to overtake any feelings of fear.

That isn't Master Shusei. It's Lord Ho. He killed the man I love, and he's hurting His Majesty.

There was another man now, wearing the skin of the kind Shusei she'd known, committing horrible acts.

Don't use his face to smile like that. Don't use his voice to say those things.

Her hands trembled as she gripped the curtain.

"Do you think I will abdicate simply because you tell me to?" Shohi asked, his gaze never leaving Shusei.

"If you plan on clinging to the throne, then we'll give you our answer," the chief general threatened. "We have five hundred bureaucrats and the might of the imperial army with me at its command. If war is what you want, then..."

But Shusei raised a hand to calm the general. The whole thing was likely a show to make him seem confident and magnanimous.

"The chief general speaks hypothetically. None of us want war. You need only relinquish the throne quietly," Shusei said kindly. "But I realize this isn't an easy decision, is it? We will give you time to decide. Let's see...ten days?"

"Ten entire days? Lord Ho, don't you think you're being a bit too merciful?" the Minister of Justice said with a frown.

"I agree. We should push him to decide tomorrow, the day after at most," the chief general added.

But Shusei shook his head and smiled.

"I think not. Ten days suits us perfectly as well," he said.

The chief general and minister exchanged glances. They seemed to agree that, whatever Shusei was implying, it meant he had some plan. So, they both gave a small nod and closed their mouths.

“We will give you ten days. I hope you make your decision before then,” the scholar repeated.

“You’ll *give him* ten days?! You little rat!” Rihan growled, unable to hold back his anger anymore.

Shusei pretended not to hear the remark and continued smiling.

“Shusei, why? Why would you do this?” Kojin asked, seemingly in pain as he looked at the scholar. He likely wasn’t able to help himself. It was like he was asking as a father would his son.

“I am your son, after all. I will do everything in my power to bring stability to Konkoku,” Shusei replied matter-of-factly. He then looked up at Shohi with a defiant gaze. “If you refuse, we will assume you desire war. It is not what we want, but you will leave us with no choice. We will rise to meet you. The imperial army, led by the chief general, will be surrounding the palace while we await your answer.”

In other words, they would essentially be sieging the palace to keep the pressure on. Shusei’s manner and delivery were gentle, but his demands and intended means were ruthless. By pushing the emperor like this, it meant he didn’t need to be subtle anymore.

“I shall return in ten days for your answer,” the scholar concluded. He bowed before turning his back to Shohi. The chief general and Minister of Justice followed as he departed, and the bureaucrats began to file out after them. The procession was an unmistakable sign that they recognized Shusei as their new ruler. It must have been a humiliating experience for Shohi.

Rimi clung tightly to the curtain as she watched Shusei leave.

This is so cruel, Lord Ho.

He deeply terrified Rimi, but he also enraged her.

What’s going to happen now? What will His Majesty do?

Shohi was motionless. Like Rimi, he just watched Shusei depart.

Whatever he does, I have to be by his side to support him.

Resolve, as well as anger toward Shusei, solidified inside the consort.

The military and part of the bureaucracy had risen in rebellion with Ho Shusei, master of the Ho House, as their leader. The news spread like wildfire through the palace, stunning all who worked there. The unrest was inflamed even further when more than a thousand soldiers entrenched themselves in the grand plaza outside the main gate of the palace. Many who lived nearby began to seek refuge, fearing the outbreak of war.

Countless aides, eunuchs, handmaids, and other servants attempted to flee while they still had a chance. The guards captured any of the deserters they found, but they were immediately released by order of the emperor.

“If they want to flee, let them flee,” he’d commanded.

After the bureaucrats left the Hall of New Harmony, Shohi wanted to immediately hold council with Kojin and his ministers. However, the chancellor refused, saying they’d just be pointlessly knocking heads together until they knew what exactly they needed to discuss. It would be better for the emperor to rest his body and mind until more was known to avoid making any incorrect decisions in his exhaustion.

Reluctantly, Shohi agreed and went to rest in his chambers. Jotetsu stayed in the living room to stand guard.

Rimi was told to return to the palace so she could rest as well, and while she agreed, she was reluctant to leave the emperor’s side.

With that in mind, she headed for the kitchen. She’d decided she would ask Chief of Dining Yo Koshin for ingredients to make dried scallop porridge for Shohi to eat when he woke up. It was a staple dish of Konkoku, good for light meals or simple breakfasts, as it was quick to prepare and didn’t have a strong flavor.

Under Yo Koshin’s command, the kitchen was as tidy as ever. Cooks were gathered in the corner, focused intently on preparing for the day’s lunch and dinner. Some peeled vegetables while others drew water. The sight made all of the anxiety and tension that Rimi had been carrying since Koto begin to drain out of her.

Seeing nothing had changed in the kitchen let Rimi breathe a little easier. A little bit of normality was good for her mind.

While the consort cooked the porridge atop a stove, Koshin checked in occasionally to help adjust the fire.

“Chief of Dining, do you know about the Ho House?” she asked.

“Yup,” he replied while peering into the fire before standing. “You talking about how a bunch of treasonous bureaucrats and the military are backing Lord Ho? They say there’s gonna be a war in ten days.”

He didn’t seem perturbed at all.

“Doesn’t that scare you? You aren’t thinking about leaving?” Rimi asked.

“As long as His Majesty’s here, he’s gonna need to eat, ain’t he? Cooks don’t run. Well, if the time comes when I have to run, maybe then, but...”

Rimi was surprised by his casual answer. Apparently, some people in the palace were still willing to stay for Shohi.

I doubt everyone is as brave as him though.

She suspected most people would probably escape while they could.

When the porridge was done, Rimi waited for the best time to serve it before going to peek into Shohi’s room. As usual, Jotetsu was sitting on the windowsill, napping. Sensing Rimi’s presence, he opened his eyes immediately.

“Rimi? I thought you went back to the rear palace,” the spy said.

“I couldn’t settle down, so I thought I’d make His Majesty some porridge for when he woke up. Is he still asleep?”

“He’s been quiet, at least,” Jotetsu said, motioning toward the bedroom with a jut of his chin.

Rimi approached the door, opened it a little, and peered through the gap. The windows were closed and the room was dark, but she could make out the silhouette of the bed. Shohi was lying face-up and suddenly looked at the doorway. Realizing it was Rimi, he seemed to relax and sat up.

“Did I wake you, Your Majesty? I’m sorry,” she apologized, opening the door

wider.

Shohi put a hand on his head and sighed.

“No, I couldn’t sleep. I was just lying down,” he said.

The emperor got out of bed, put on a thin robe, and came out to the living room.

“You don’t look good, Your Majesty,” Jotetsu said with a concerned look.

“No, I don’t imagine being besieged by my own army and told to abdicate does wonders for my complexion,” Shohi said with a wry, tortured smile.

“You’ve got me there,” Jotetsu chuckled.

His Majesty has been hurt and driven into a corner, but he’s still so calm.

Nobody would blame him for feeling afraid, sad, or panicked. He needed a strong spirit to be able to joke at a time like this. It was encouraging.

I need to do whatever I can for him. I’m going to protect him.

Rimi couldn’t really do much, but she wouldn’t be able to live with herself if she just shrugged and did nothing. If the consort had one talent, it was serving food. It wasn’t something that could break someone out of a tough situation, but this was exactly the sort of situation where it could have some real use. Even if she couldn’t change his situation or protect him physically, perhaps she could bolster his spirit.

“Are you hungry? If you think you can eat, I’ve prepared some porridge for you,” she said.

“Yes, I should try to eat something,” Shohi said, nodding.

He probably didn’t have an appetite and was just going along with it as the responsible thing. Still, she appreciated that he was willing to try.

Rimi went to the kitchen and returned with the meal. Shohi and Jotetsu both sat at the table, and she served a portion to each of them.

The porridge had a rich flavor and smelled faintly of the sea. The ingredients were delicious on their own, so the only seasoning she’d added was salt. It was a simple, easy-to-eat meal.

I wish I could give them some kaorizuke to go with it. That would be perfect.

Rimi's prized kaorizuke pot had been left back at the Palace of the Water Spirit. She didn't feel whole without it, but she could hardly run off to get it during a situation like this.

Enticed by the smell of the porridge, Tama peeked her head out from beneath the hem of Rimi's skirt. She sniffed the air and hopped up on the table.

"Quinary Dragon, will you be joining us?" Shohi asked with a smile. Tama nodded.

Rimi filled a bowl for Tama as well, which the little dragon shoved her upper half into. Judging from the way she gobbled the porridge up, she must have been starving.

The sun was beginning to dip in the sky. Its rays came through the walkway, stretched across the floor, and ended at Shohi's feet. As the emperor lifted his spoon to his mouth, he looked out through the window at the gardens.

"It's quiet," he suddenly said. "Quite a few people have left the palace, it seems."

There was no anger or tears in his voice. Just a quiet assertion. When Rimi wondered what he might be feeling, her heart ached.

I wish I had a better way of comforting him.

A slender silhouette appeared in the doorway.

"Forgive me, Your Majesty, I am about to—"

The figure, with her wavy hair and crimson shenyi, was Ryo Renka, the new Minister of Personnel. At the sight of the food on the table, she stopped speaking and seemed to grow a bit envious.

"Oh, that smells amazing. What is that, porridge?" Renka asked.

"Join us?" Shohi offered.

"As much as I'd love to eat, Kojin would have my hide," she said, shaking her head. "He told me to get you. He says we know enough now to discuss matters. Rihan and Keiyu have both been summoned to your office. We would like you

to come as well.”

Shohi’s expression tightened. His eyes looked ready for war as he stood.

“Understood. I’ll change and be right there,” the emperor said.

After summoning a servant to help him quickly change clothes, Shohi left with Jotetsu. Rimi knew she had no place in their meeting, so she stayed behind in the room, alone. She sat at the table for a while with her chin in her hand, watching Tama work away at the porridge.

Will His Majesty go to war with Lord Ho? Or will he abdicate?

Rimi wasn’t sure what Shohi would do. What would he take from the conference with Kojin and the others? What decision would he make? All she could do was wait and see.

Decision?

As Rimi watched Tama, a memory returned to her again. A voice, which had seemed like Tama’s voice.

“Hey, Tama. When we were at the Shus’ home in Koto, did you say ‘it is decided’?”

The dragon lifted her head from the bowl and made a strange gesture with her head. It was somewhere between a confused tilt and a nod.

Does Tama not know if it came from her either?

That’s how it seemed. What relationship was there between the Quinary Dragon and the emperor, exactly? If the little dragon really was a divine beast delivering the will of Heaven, then her words had to have some kind of meaning. Especially since Rimi had never heard Tama’s voice before. Something this unusual had to be important.

I want to know what it meant.

As she thought about how she might learn more, Rimi suddenly remembered something else. When Tama had fallen ill before, Shusei had searched for some documents that the Ministry of Rites kept stored in the cuisinology hall. He’d been able to learn more about her condition from those.

If I go to the cuisinology hall, maybe I can learn something.

Sitting around waiting for the emperor's decision wouldn't do anything to calm Rimi down. She had to find some way to help, no matter how small.

"You just stay and enjoy your porridge, Tama," Rimi said as she left. As she traveled the Hall of the Rising Dragon's walkways, she passed by Kyo Kunki. She didn't want Shohi to worry about her being gone when he returned, so she told Kunki she was heading for the cuisinology hall.

I hope those words can give His Majesty some strength. I hope it's something that can soothe his heart.

Rimi's pace was hurried as she made her way to the cuisinology hall.

III

Shusei...

As Shohi walked to his office with Jotetsu behind him, he thought back to how Shusei had smiled at the Autumn Garden. The smile he'd given him on that windswept platform was burned into the emperor's memory.

It was such a sincere smile. Not a hint of a lie. No hint of hate either.

Did that mean he really believed demanding Shohi's abdication was for the good of Konkoku? Perhaps there was no hatred behind it, but it meant the man had crushingly little faith in Shohi's qualifications as emperor.

So you think Konkoku will be more stable with you ruling it? You, who didn't even hesitate to plunge us into chaos?!

That was what the scholar's actions would bring. There was no doubt about it. Governance would stall, and if Shohi refused, the country would break into civil war. His actions directly contradicted what he hoped to achieve.

Shohi didn't hate Shusei, but he felt a wave of intense anger boiling inside him. Anger toward both his own inept self and Shusei's insane, antithetical, and out-of-character actions.

Shusei was surely convinced of his own thinking, meaning he would give the

emperor no quarter. Shohi was left with only two choices: abdication or war.

Like he said, if I just hopelessly cling to the throne, I'll end up on the pyre.

While he'd been laying down, the thought had been spinning endlessly in his mind, so much it made his head hurt.

With the imperial army stationed in the capital, there could be no hope of the emperor's own military being victorious. Shusei had known that when he'd given the emperor ten days to abdicate.

"Will you fight, knowing you have no chance of winning? It would be ideal if you step down peacefully. But fight for all I care. I've already won the war," Shusei's challenging smirk seemed to imply. It was a game of togi, and Shohi was already dead on the board.

To the empire, I'm replaceable.

That realization was what had prompted Shohi to go and bring Kojin back from Koto himself. He had come to understand just how unnecessary his presence was. That hadn't changed either. Somewhere deep down, the emperor felt he should probably be considering abdication. If that was the path to peace and prosperity for Konkoku, then who was he to fight it?

But will placing the crown in Shusei's hands actually bring that about?

The scholar's behavior, so inconsistent with his claimed beliefs, revealed the danger behind his thinking.

"Jotetsu, do you think placing a Ho on the throne will bring stability to Konkoku?" Shohi asked as they walked, not turning to look back. The spy had been Shohi's companion since childhood and never minced his words. He knew the mind of both the common people and Shusei.

"It would be chaos," Jotetsu answered without hesitation.

"What makes you think that?"

"I mean, there's a reason Shu Kojin set up Hakurei as a warning system."

"Hakurei? What does he have to do with anything?" Shohi asked. He stopped and turned, surprised to hear the eunuch's name.

“Well, you already know how Hakurei was supposed to tip Kojin off to trouble, right? That’s just how wary the old man was of Ho Neison. All the years Neison worked as Minister of Rites, he conspired with the old ministers of Personnel and Revenue. He expanded his house’s lands while skimming money from provincial taxes to stock their vaults. Apparently, he went so wild that Kojin had to do something about it. Ended up forcing Neison into retirement.”

“You can’t be serious,” the emperor said, stunned. Neison had already retired when Shohi had taken the throne, so he’d only ever known the man as master of the Ho House and a formerly distinguished servant. He’d known that Kojin had forced him into retirement, but that was all. “But I’d heard he was beloved even after retiring.”

“Oh, absolutely,” Jotetsu smirked. “Beloved by all the people who got rich living in his pocket. Ho Neison never knew how to keep his personal business and his duty to the empire separate, and now, he’s the one driving Shusei.”

Kan Cho’un, the prefectural administrator of An, had claimed that his foster father, Kan Rakusei, had risked his life, spending a year and a half fighting the government for tax relief. Bad harvests had likely been the main culprit, but they had also suffered under officials working with the support of the Ho House.

Certainly, Kojin must have had times where even he couldn’t deny the cruelties those people were capable of. He then used his position under a disinterested emperor to systematically root out all of the corrupt bureaucrats he could find. Shohi had ascended to the throne when the dirty work had already been finished.

With a Ho on the throne, all his years of effort will be washed away. Would that mean even Hakurei’s fate would be for nothing?

Kojin, who had a single-minded devotion to Konkoku, had deemed the Ho House dangerous. He had worked to keep them away from the wheels of government. There had to be a reason for it.

“When I was a kid back in Shohei, we had some real tough times,” Jotetsu continued. “The tax collectors would take more than they were due and then give the extra to their bosses as gifts. It was their way of getting in good with

the Ho officials. But when the old emperor took the throne and Shu Kojin became chancellor, things slowly started getting better. Things are a lot better back home than they used to be.”

Things were that bad?

Shohi bit his lip angrily.

There’s still so much I don’t know. No wonder Shusei looks down on me.

Still, the emperor knew there were things he didn’t know. It was why he had retainers who could teach him things and warn him of danger.

Shohi wasn’t sure if Shusei could see the contradictions in his own actions. If he wasn’t aware, it was because there was no one around him to point it out. And if he didn’t have anyone like that, what would happen when he was on the throne? Wouldn’t he end up as a tyrant with nobody to point out his mistakes or contradictions?

The old Shusei would’ve seen it immediately.

When did he become like this?

Shohi didn’t hate his old friend, but he was angry at the man’s actions and aware of the danger they represented.

I cannot let this Shusei be emperor. Maybe war is the only answer.

But how could he actually fight that war?

“I see now. Let’s go,” the emperor said as he resumed walking, torn somewhere between conviction and doubt.

A cold, dry autumn wind began to blow.



Jotetsu heaved a silent sigh as he followed Shohi.

How did it come to this, Shusei?

The spy had been at the Palace of the Water Spirit recuperating from an injury when he’d first heard of Shusei’s decision to join the Ho House. Jotetsu had been wounded protecting Rimi from assassins, and the scholar had come to see how he was recovering. That was when he’d announced his plan to take up the

mantle of Lord Ho. He said he “was going to enjoy his fate.” He’d also claimed it was to benefit the emperor.

And I bought it without even thinking.

But then, at the Autumn Garden in Koto, the man had dared to say that pushing Shohi off the throne was for his own good. Jotetsu had wanted nothing more than to cut Shusei down at that moment.

However, despite all of his anger, not to mention his emperor’s command, something powerful was keeping him from drawing his blade on the scholar. It was a belief: he’d known Shusei since childhood, and the Shusei he knew would never betray Shohi.

Yet whatever the man was thinking, Jotetsu would give his life to protect Shohi. That wouldn’t change. Looking at the emperor now, his build still slender with youth, his resolve to protect the man was renewed.

Shohi, a lonely, selfish, malnourished, and temperamental boy unloved by his own mother, had invited Jotetsu to sit down at a table with him. The spy hadn’t realized it then, but he supposed he’d been drafted into the emperor’s service from that moment on. And if a guileless act like that had won Jotetsu’s loyalty, there had to be some kind of divine providence behind it.

His Majesty has Heaven on his side.

Jotetsu believed it completely.



Fewer lanterns were lighting the palace than usual, but Rimi was relieved to see the Ministry of Rites where the cuisinology hall was located still showed signs of life.

The majestic octagonal hall on the edge of the ministry grounds was draped in darkness. It stocked documents belonging to the Ministry of Rites, but they were rarely used by the bureaucrats. As a result, the cuisinology hall saw little business.

As Rimi opened the doors, she was greeted by the familiar smell of old paper and ink. The bookshelves that filled the walls and stretched toward the ceiling looked down solemnly at her. She groped her way through the darkened hall

toward the desks and found a candle.

The fall air at night was cold and still, and the hall's lofty ceilings only deepened the effect. Rimi could feel the chill rise through her feet and into her body.

"There were writings on Tama—on the Quinary Dragon. But where would they be?"

Candle in hand, the consort approached the place where she remembered Shusei pulling out a book. The shelf was packed with thread-bound books, so she randomly pulled one out. It clearly had nothing to do with food, instead listing information on Heaven, the gods, and associated rites. She was definitely in the Bureau of Sacrifices section. She began pulling out books and laying them out on the floor. However, as she looked over the titles, she started losing heart.

"I can't do anything with this. I can't even tell what these books are about."

If Rimi wanted to find material related to the Quinary Dragon, the Bureau of Sacrifices, which dealt in religious and ritual matters, would have it. But religious material was full of specialized vocabulary, none of which was familiar to the consort. The titles alone looked frightening and overwhelming to her.

I wish Master Shusei were here.

Even though the scholar was the source of her troubles, Rimi still found herself wanting to reach out to him. Realizing the futility of it, she shook her head.

"Pull yourself together," she chastised herself. "There has to be someone else who can help."

She tried to think of someone who would not only spare any effort to help Shohi but also someone knowledgeable who she knew well enough to ask for help.

"I know!"

In a flash of insight, the consort rushed out of the cuisinology hall.

Master Hakurei!

He was close to Rimi and would surely be willing to labor for the emperor's benefit. He was also quick-witted and had to know things about the Quinary Dragon since he had been raised in the palace as a prince. Not to mention, he was one of the few people who knew about Tama.

The rear palace was located rather far from the cuisinology hall, so by the time Rimi arrived, she was out of breath. She was surprised to see the main gate manned and the braziers lit. With so many people fleeing the capital, she hadn't expected to see life carrying on as normal in the rear palace.

Rimi passed through the gate and headed for the director's office but was told he was currently at the Palace of Northern Peaks. It appeared he had gathered the four consorts there to explain matters.

As the consort worked her way to the Palace of Northern Peaks, she was struck by the residents' attempts to maintain a tranquil normality, as if nothing was going on outside. The buildings were well-lit, and there was nobody anxiously roaming the grounds.

It seems like Director Hakurei has things under control here.

Rimi could hear someone playing a guqin as she neared the palace. They were accompanied by the sound of an erhu and biwa.

The four consorts.

Just the memory of them filled Rimi with courage and happiness. She would soon be surrounded by clever women who had all sworn fealty to Shohi. And while they might complain in the process, they were always ready to lend Rimi a helping hand.

Playing music at a time like this was just another sign of their resourcefulness. Civil war was brewing, and the people were anxious. The dark of night would only exacerbate their worries. The four consorts were almost certainly playing music to help alleviate people's concerns and calm the atmosphere.

"His Majesty's reign is stable," they seemed to be saying.

As soon as Rimi entered the Palace of Northern Peaks, the four consorts' handmaids noticed her and ushered the future empress into the palace's reception hall. Folding doors stood open, offering a view of the gardens. Within

the hall, the four consorts sat peacefully and played music.

Noble Consort So's hair was adorned with a bundle of small fall flowers. It resembled an extravagant *kusudama*, an ornamental flower ball they would split open during Wakokuan celebrations. She was the one playing the guqin. Nearby, Virtuous Consort Ho sat boldly with her legs crossed. She held a plectrum and strummed a biwa, which sang out beneath her elegant fingerwork. Worthy Consort On seemed locked in prayer as she played an erhu.

Meanwhile, Hakurei stood off to the side and watched.

Pure Consort Yo was the only one of the four not playing, choosing instead to watch So's fingers with her big, round eyes. Yo had never been particularly good with instruments, and while she had some experience with the guqin, the consort had apparently decided she didn't want to play today.

Seemingly feeling Rimi's gaze, Yo suddenly looked up. The moment she saw Rimi, she burst into a smile.

"My dearest!"

At that, So, Ho, and On all stopped playing and turned their gazes. Seeing the future empress, they all jumped to their feet. Hakurei looked over as well and seemed shocked by her arrival.

"Forgive my intrusion, consorts," Rimi said, bowing.

Yo rushed over and dragged Rimi into the room by her arm.

"*Intrusion?! Never!* Do you know how badly I've wanted to see you? I'd heard you were back, but when you didn't come to see us, I got worried!"

Consort So raced over as well, thrusting her face at Rimi and seizing her by the collar.

"How is His Majesty?! You must tell us, Lady of Precious Bevy!" the Noble Consort commanded.

"I want to know what the council plans to do," Ho glowered.

All On could manage was to stare at Rimi with tearful, worried eyes.

"Dearest! Dearest!" Yo prodded as she nearly swung from Rimi's arm. "Is

there going to be a war? Is there, dearest? Is there?"

The consorts had seemed so calm while playing their instruments, but apparently, they weren't calm at all.

They're so worked up. But of course they are...

Seeing the four consorts so agitated made Rimi all the more focused.

"Err, well, where do I begin..." Rimi stammered.

"Welcome back, Rimi. I'm glad to see you've returned," Hakurei said as he approached the beleaguered future empress. "You know, I heard the most ridiculous thing. Supposedly, His Majesty left for Koto without telling anybody."

Rimi bowed her head apologetically at his annoyed tone. The eunuch was without a doubt unhappy that Shohi had left without notifying his vassals and was taking the opportunity to vent his anger.

"I'm sorry. There's a lot you need to know about, and I should've come sooner," she apologized.

"I know about the current 'disturbance' already. Not much to be done about that, though," Hakurei said. "The main thing I'd like to know is how His Majesty is doing. Beyond that, we're all curious whether there will be war."

"His Majesty is taking things very calmly. He's tired, but he's collected. As for whether there will be war, he, Chancellor Shu, and the ministers are discussing that right now. I doubt they've come to an answer yet," Rimi reported.

The four consorts let out a collective sigh.

"Nothing yet, then," So said with some relief. "Well, I'm glad he's staying calm. That's what matters."

"So then, all we can do is wait?" Ho asked.

"Yes, that's our only option right now," Rimi nodded. "But while we wait, there was something I wanted Master Hakurei's help with. I'm struggling on my own with it."

Hakurei blinked curiously.

"Me? What can I help with?" he asked.

“It’s about Tama. When I was in Koto, I heard her speak. She said ‘it is decided.’”

When Hakurei heard about Tama, or rather, the Quinary Dragon, his expression shifted to one of concern.

“‘It is decided?’ You’re sure?” he asked.

“That’s what I heard. And I’m sure it was Tama that said it.”

“How can you be chatting about your little pet at a time like this?!” So angrily interrupted. “Yes, your mouse spoke! What an amazing trick you’ve taught it! You’re going to bother Hakurei with that? Now, of all times?! He has more important things to think about than pet tricks!”

“I, err, yes, I certainly see what you mean,” Rimi said, flinching under the Noble Consort’s barrage. “It’s just that Tama is important to His Majesty, and —”

“What importance could a talking mouse possibly have to His Majesty?!”

“I think she might have something to do with his reign, so—”

“A *mouse*?!”

“Noble Consort So, perhaps you should refrain from calling it a mouse,” Hakurei said.

“Am I not allowed to call a mouse a mouse? Why not?” So demanded.

“It’s just a bit rude.”

“Rude to a mouse?!” So shouted incredulously.

“Lady Setsu, Hakurei, you two are hiding something,” Ho said, narrowing her eyes. “Lady Setsu is one thing, but I simply don’t see you making a face like that over a pet, Hakurei. Something’s going on, isn’t it?”

Rimi and Hakurei exchanged glances at the astute observation.

Chapter 2: A Chance of Victory

I

I have to be careful who I tell about Tama.

The four consorts stared intently at Hakurei and Rimi in crushing silence. Clearly, they wouldn't accept any lies or omissions.

But they're all so smart. I can't think of an excuse they wouldn't see through. They'd doubt me, and I need their trust now more than ever. I suppose my only option right now is the truth.

The four consorts were some of Shohi's most trusted servants. It was impossible to say what was to come, but whatever happened, they'd probably be better able to help Shohi and Tama if they knew the truth. And if Rimi could have them help search for information on the Quinary Dragon, they'd undoubtedly find an answer sooner as well.

If I can trust anyone, it's them.

"Master Hakurei, it's the four consorts. Surely..."

"...it's all right to tell them?" Rimi asked with a glance as she looked back at the eunuch.

Hakurei sighed softly but gave a defeated nod. The future empress turned back to the consorts and straightened up.

"I have been hiding the truth from you about Tama," Rimi announced. "She's not a mouse. His Majesty has charged me with caring for her...because she is the Quinary Dragon."

All at once, the consorts tilted their heads in confusion. The doubt was almost palpable.

"Wait, the Quinary Dragon? I've heard of that. It's the divine dragon that gives the emperor the right to rule. It stays with the emperor, and he's the only one

who gets to see it, right? I heard it came to the rear palace before, but—”

Yo suddenly stopped talking and began blinking. It was like her mind had stopped working. As for So, Ho, and On, the color had rapidly drained from their faces.

“You’re not saying...that long mouse you keep...” So said with a stunned half-smile.

“Yes, don’t be ridiculous. Not that mouse. It couldn’t be,” Ho said with a weak laugh.

“Of course, that’s preposterous...isn’t it?” On added.

Maybe it’s a good thing Tama wasn’t here for this.

Rimi was having a hard time listening to this. She could only imagine how grumpy the dragon would’ve been to hear them doubt her identity after being called a mouse so many times.

“I’m sorry. I know it sounds ridiculous,” Rimi said. “But yes, Tama is the Quinary Dragon. And yes, she’s supposed to stay by His Majesty’s side. There was just a little mishap, and she ended up running off to the rear palace. I found her and fed her, and she got attached to me. And then, things just sort of happened...”

So, On, and Ho stared in incredulous disbelief.

“But if that’s true, and the Quinary Dragon really has gotten attached to you, then...doesn’t that mean you should be on the throne, dearest?” Yo asked, looking at Rimi with wide, round eyes.

“You airheaded little...” So said as she slapped the back of the Pure Consort’s head.

“Ow! What was that for?!” she responded tearfully.

“If that became public knowledge, it would threaten His Majesty’s rule. What you just said would become an excuse for anyone who wanted to rebel against him,” On said with an uncharacteristically stern look.

Realization finally seemed to dawn on Yo as she clamped her hands over her mouth.

“People like her are exactly why you didn’t tell anybody about this, I’d guess,” Ho said with an annoyed sigh. “Even in the best of times, people are worried about having a young emperor, and the Ho House isn’t helping matters. You knew about this, Hakurei?”

“I did,” the eunuch admitted with an apologetic smile.

Consort So glared at Rimi with her hands on her hips.

“I can’t stand the fact that you lied, but I *suppose* you didn’t have a choice. I’ll forgive you. This time,” she tacked on angrily.

“Thank you...” Rimi said, ducking her head and trying to seem as small as possible.

“So what’s this about then? You told Hakurei you needed help,” So asked.

“When I was in Koto, His Majesty and Lord Ho confronted each other. That was when I heard what I thought was Tama’s voice,” Rimi explained.

“What did it say?” Yo asked, her curiosity plain as she leaned forward.

“Not much. Like I said, ‘it is decided.’”

“Aww,” Yo said disappointedly. Unlike the Pure Consort, however, So, On, and Ho all looked serious.

“‘It is decided?’ That sounds important. If it said that while His Majesty was confronting Lord Ho, then I’m especially curious.”

“Is that a good omen? I’d hate to think it’s a bad one...” On said, her voice wavering anxiously.

The Quinary Dragon granted the emperor the power to rule. What could it have “decided?” If they could learn that, maybe they could better understand whether the future Shohi chose was bright or dark. If bright, they could encourage him to pursue his decision even more fervently. If dark, they could urge him not to make any risky decisions. The four consorts had all been educated to attend to the emperor. They all knew the importance of their duty.

When an emperor had the Quinary Dragon’s blessings, it meant fewer disasters, good fortune, and long periods of prosperity for the land. That emperor would receive Heaven’s favor. In other words, the Quinary Dragon’s

presence with an emperor signified Heaven had destined him to rule.

“I don’t know whether it’s a good thing or bad thing either,” Rimi said. “But I want to know. That’s why I decided to look at the Bureau of Sacrifice texts in the cuisinology hall. But the language in those books is really difficult. They’re full of words I don’t know. There’s no way I can understand them, no matter how hard I try. That’s why I was hoping for Master Hakurei and you four to come and help me.”

“With your vocabulary, I’m not surprised,” So said, sticking up her nose. “In that case, leave it to us. We’ll search for you.”



The imperial office’s doors were emblazoned with the image of a rising dragon. When Shohi opened the door, he found Shu Kojin, Ryo Renka, To Rihan, and Jin Keiyu waiting for him. They all greeted the emperor with a bow as he and Jotetsu entered.

On the desk in the center of his office, hastily written papers were scattered around a crude map of Konkoku. Candles cast flickering, orange light over the mess.

“I don’t need a briefing or your explanations. Every moment counts,” Shohi said calmly as he approached his desk. “What I want is everyone’s honest opinions. What should I do ten days from now? Abdicate? Or go to war with the Ho House?”

There was a moment of silence before Kojin finally spoke.

“Perhaps first, we should hear your will, Your Majesty.”

“As long as Konkoku thrives and the people are happy, I don’t believe it has to be me on the throne,” Shohi said after a deep breath.

Perhaps it seemed like a timid thing to say as unease flickered momentarily in his council’s eyes.

“I do not mind the idea of giving up the throne, assuming it falls to someone suited to the task. It sounds extreme, but even if Kojin were to say he planned on taking the throne, I would abdicate with a sigh of relief,” the emperor continued.

He stopped speaking then, and a grave silence fell. Rihan and Keiyu stared at Shohi, unsure of what exactly he was implying. Renka seemed to be carefully considering the meaning behind his words. Kojin, however, could tell the emperor had more to say.

“Go on,” the chancellor’s look seemed to convey.

Shohi appreciated that look. In the past, Kojin’s look had always been cold. He seemed to view the emperor as a cruel, stupid brat. But things seemed different now. He could tell his chancellor was listening to him.

“If I step down now, I assume a Ho will rise as emperor. In other words: Shusei. One of Konkoku’s foremost scholars. The man is indeed a genius. We can probably all agree he’s far smarter than I am. But can the Shusei we’re seeing really bring stability to our empire?”

The scholar’s smile flashed in Shohi’s mind. The old Shusei could never have threatened him with such an unclouded smile. Something had changed in his old friend.

“Shusei claims to want stability for this land. But my abdication would drive Konkoku into chaos. His actions contradict his desires, yet he’s going forward with this anyway. Maybe he thinks the chaos will be momentary and is simply accepting it as a bitter pill. But momentary or not, his actions invite chaos, which means he does not truly want stability,” Shohi explained. “There are other ways to bring about stability, but he has ignored those and gone straight for the choice that invites chaos. I cannot trust a man like that to be a wise ruler.”

His gaze traveled across Kojin and his ministers before he continued.

“And I cannot grant the throne to a man I do not trust. I will not abdicate.”

Kojin nodded slightly.

“So you’re choosing war?” Renka asked immediately.

“I cannot abdicate. But right now, a war would just end in my defeat,” Shohi said, frowning.

It was the reason he felt checkmated. He couldn’t abdicate, but he didn’t

want to enter an unwinnable war.

“Shusei has firm control of the imperial army. The only soldiers I can count on are the palace guards and the regiment stationed here. Even if I wanted war, I can’t win with a force like that. And yet...I cannot abdicate,” the emperor lamented.

Shohi bit his lip in frustration. He didn’t want to give up the peace that Kojin had labored so hard to build. Then there was also the trade relationship that they’d worked so long and hard for with Saisakoku, which was right on the horizon. Undoing that would be an outright tragedy.

If only I were stronger. If only I were a greater man. If only I had Heaven’s blessing.

But that was hopeless. Only the Quinary Dragon had that power, and it had only just begun warming up to Shohi. Besides, it was hard to believe a little creature like that could do much more than be a pet.

“There is a chance of victory,” Kojin said calmly.

“What?” Shohi replied, stunned.

“There is a chance of victory,” the chancellor repeated, looking directly at the emperor. “Assuming we can turn the advantage of time in your favor.”

“Explain.”

“Take a look. These are the troops we believe the Ho House has at their disposal,” Ryo Renka, the new Minister of Personnel, said as she slid a paper toward Shohi.

According to the calculations on the page, the chief general had a force of about thirty-two thousand men. A thousand of them were camped in front of the palace, while the rest were stationed in fortresses around the capital.

“And these are the troops still loyal to you,” Renka continued, sliding another paper to the emperor. It listed the royal guards and soldiers stationed in the palace. In all, about fifteen hundred men.

“There’s more than I thought. How many men have fled?”

“Less than a hundred. Most of your bureaucrats and servants remain as well.

The cooks are also still here, so it seems we'll have something to eat tonight," Renka added jokingly.

This many people stayed behind?

By staying, those people had effectively vowed to support Shohi. It warmed his heart to know there were so many who would stay for him. At least some people still wanted to see him on the throne. The numbers gave him courage.

To Rihan, Minister of Revenue, approached the emperor.

"As we hold the palace, we'll inevitably be on the defensive. The Hos will have to breach our position, and defense has an inherent advantage over offense. Traditional wisdom says the attacking side needs three times the men to overcome a defense," Rihan explained.

"Thirty-two thousand still gives them an overwhelming advantage though, doesn't it?" Shohi asked.

"Yes, you don't have enough men in the palace to win. But you have other forces," Rihan clarified. The minister's faint smile made the scar beneath his right eye contort.

"And where am I going to get these forces?"

"The prefectural armies."

In a flash, a face popped into Shohi's head. The man they called Hero of the Countryside, Kan Cho'un—the gaunt, permanently glowering administrator of An.

"You earned the trust of Kan Cho'un, who represented the other administrators and stopped the prefectural armies from revolting. And after that, you continued to hear and respond to the administrators' requests. If you ask them to deploy the prefectural armies, I'm confident they will," Rihan explained. "As emperor, you've been the greatest supporter the provinces could ask for, so they should be strongly in favor of keeping you on the throne. If we mobilize all the prefectural armies, not just An's, then we should have no less than forty thousand regular soldiers."

As Minister of Revenue, Rihan was in a position to keep a close eye on

provincial politics. After the matter with Kan Cho'un, he had worked with the local administrations, per Shohi's request. If he believed that the administrators and their armies would move on the emperor's behalf, then it had to be true.

Each prefecture had anywhere from a few thousand to ten thousand regular troops to call on. It was possible, when necessary, to conscript more men as levies, those who would normally be out doing work such as tilling fields. Supposedly, each prefecture could field a hundred thousand men in total. But this took time, so only the regulars would be able to immediately respond to Shohi's call.

Still, with all the prefectures put together, the regulars would make for a powerful force.

"On top of that, you've developed a strong relationship with Prince Shar and Princess Aisha of Saisakoku. If you asked for aid, they would probably spare some, if not many, troops," Jin Keiyu, Minister of Rites, said with his typical playful smile.

Saisakoku was distant, but it shared a border with one of the continent's northwestern countries. By sea, it was possible to make a round trip in about seven days.

"During the troubles in the Southern Trinity thirty years ago, Saisakoku sent aid to one of the kingdoms they had close ties with. At that time, they sent about three thousand men," Keiyu continued.

Shohi could hardly believe the numbers as he added them up.

I have fifteen hundred men now and could expect forty thousand from the prefectures as well as three thousand more from Saisakoku. That would be 44,500 men in total. More than the Ho loyalists.

"Now, that's something," Jotetsu said from beside the wall with a soft whistle. "Assuming everything goes to plan, that is."

"I anticipate both the prefectures and Saisakoku heeding our call," Renka said, her arms crossed confidently. "From my time traveling the provinces, I'd say the prefectural armies are a sure thing. And Saisakoku sent their princess for Qi. They clearly approve of a relationship with Konkoku."

“But can we win?” Shohi asked cautiously.

“Yes,” Kojin nodded. “But it will come down to time. We have to give the Ho House an answer in ten days. The question is whether the prefectural armies and Saisakokuan aid will arrive in time. Even if they respond to our requests, it won’t matter if they don’t make it in time.”

It would take a while to rally the troops and prepare for war. It would do no good to send envoys and call for aid if the war was over before they arrived. Would their reinforcements arrive before war broke out? If not, Shohi was doomed.

“Will they make it in time?” the emperor asked.

“Sending an envoy to the administrators and waiting for them to deliberate would take three days. It would take another two days to ready the necessary equipment and provisions for the armies. Mobilizing forty thousand troops would take four days, minimum. The more men, the slower it would go. Even assuming everything goes smoothly, we’d need nine or ten days,” Renka calculated.

“So our best-case scenario is a close call? What about Saisakoku?” Shohi asked Keiyu.

“Good question,” the Minister of Rites said, placing a finger on the tip of his chin as he thought. “About seven days for a round trip journey by ship, I’d say. It will really come down to how quickly Saisakoku responds to our request. I’d guess two days to deliberate and four days to ready the troops and ships. At best, it would be thirteen, fourteen days. Maybe more.”

“So, in all likelihood, Saisakoku wouldn’t make it in time?” Shohi said, placing both hands on his desk and staring at the assorted papers.

Do I fight?

If it came to war, the casualties would be considerable.

But Kojin wanted to keep the Ho House as far from power as possible. He even set up a warning system for them. If I hand power to a group like that, isn’t it basically betraying my duty?

The emperor's heart was a maelstrom of doubt.

Not to mention, this Shusei is not the man I knew. The Shusei I knew wasn't a fool who would try to build stability through chaos. I can't give him the throne.

Shohi didn't believe Shusei hated him. Nor did the emperor hate his old friend. But to Shusei, Shohi was an obstacle to his goals, and to Shohi, Shusei was trying to steal and destroy the things that needed to be protected.

The scholar's unclouded smile flashed through Shohi's mind once more. It made him angry, which was transforming into the urge to confront him.

I can't accept you, Shusei. Not as you are now.

If they were going to request reinforcements, the envoys had to be sent immediately for there to be any hope of the troops arriving in time. For Saisakoku, even that might be too late. Shohi couldn't afford to waver.

Shohi raised his gaze and looked at Kojin, who was patiently awaiting the emperor's decision. Renka, Rihan, and Keiyu were also all waiting on him. And Jotetsu, who was standing off to the side, would only ever move on Shohi's orders.

The decision ultimately fell to the emperor.

I have to choose. The fate of these people, and the empire, is in my hands. Do I really have to make such a hefty decision alone? Is that what it means to be emperor?

The incredible weight of his duty was almost frightening. He clenched his fists as the loneliness of it overtook him. But this was what Shohi had asked for. A decision had to be made, or else he was no emperor.

It's so heavy.

Depending on what he chose, countless people would be in danger. The people could suffer. The weight of it all filled Shohi with unease, and he looked pleadingly at Kojin.

There was a deep trust in the way the chancellor looked at Shohi. It was a look of silent allegiance. *"Whatever you choose, I'll follow."* Kojin trusted his emperor.

He's waiting for what I have to say. He recognizes and supports me as emperor. Kojin believes in me. And if he believes in me, why not believe in myself as well?

Shohi trusted Kojin, so he felt he needed to trust Kojin's judgment of himself.

Determination filled him. A desire to trust in himself flared up inside the emperor.

"We fight. I will go to war with Shusei."

II

With that single statement, tension suddenly filled the air.

Shohi straightened and looked slowly across his council.

"War will require sacrifices. I understand that. But I cannot simply hand over Konkoku. Carelessly giving up the throne would be the same as abandoning it, and I will not abandon my duty. We must win. I will write letters to Kan Cho'un and the emperor of Saisakoku at once. Kojin, ready envoys to deliver them."

At the emperor's order, Kojin spun on his heel to face Rihan.

"Rihan, you will deliver the message to Kan Cho'un. If a minister delivers it personally, he should understand the seriousness of the matter," the chancellor ordered.

"Understood," Rihan said with a hardened expression.

"I'll send the Minister of Works to Saisakoku. He's a strong man and should have no problem enduring a journey by ship. Moreover, he comes from the northwestern region bordering Saisakoku, so he's skilled in the Saisakokuan language," Kojin explained. "A single wrong word can cause a misunderstanding, and in a situation like this, it's important we deliver our message without an intermediary."

Shohi nodded at Kojin's quick, precise decision-making.

"Good. I will prepare the letters immediately. Rihan, ready yourself for your journey. Inform the Minister of Works as well," the emperor ordered.

Shohi sat down at his desk, picked up a brush, and set to work on a blank sheet of paper.

Rihan and Keiyu left the office. At Kojin's order, Renka went to meet with the Minister of Works.

"If only we had another three days, or if we'd sent an envoy to Saisakoku a few days ago, then maybe they would have made it in time," Kojin said bitterly.

"Nothing had happened a few days ago, so there's no use complaining about it now," Shohi said with a sad smile. "We have a good chance of the prefectural armies arriving in time, at least. Even if Saisakoku arrives three or four days late to the battle, we'll still be fine with the prefectural armies. If we can hold out for those three or four days, the Saisakokuan forces will be able to reinforce us. Perhaps together we can strike the final blow."

A strategy like this, which hinged on outside assistance, would ultimately come down to their reinforcements. A plan with so many variables made for a poor strategy, but it was the only one they had.

We have to win. No matter how.

It was easy to see this would be a battle against time. When war broke out, whoever had the superior forces and better preparation would likely prevail. Even if they managed some elaborate strategy, they couldn't expect to win without manpower. Certainly, history books told stories like that. But they'd been recorded specifically because they were such unusual cases.

Victory or defeat. It would be decided during their ten-day reprieve.

If they make it in time, we can win.



Upon returning to his office, Rihan drafted a letter granting the Vice Minister of Revenue acting authority during his absence. He then began preparing for his journey. The minister couldn't afford to return home to his estate, so he collected what necessities he could in the palace.

The cloak he found was musty and too short, but it would have to do. While arranging his luggage and trying to endure the moldy smell, he heard someone snickering from the entrance.

“The Minister of Revenue running errands? It must be the end times,” Keiyu observed, leaning against the doorframe.

“So, you can laugh even at a time like this? I envy that,” Rihan grumbled. The Minister of Rites was always irreverent, but it was especially aggravating now.

“Why not follow my lead?”

“I envy your ability, but I’ll be dead before you see me acting like you.”

Rihan was suddenly reminded of Shusei back in the days he’d served beneath this jester. The scholar had always seemed put off by Keiyu’s lack of seriousness. But he worked tirelessly to support Shohi all the while.

And now he thinks he’s so high and mighty that he’ll give His Majesty a reprieve?

When had the man changed so much? It seemed impossible. Had it always been somewhere deep inside him, and something had pulled it out of him? Did that mean Rihan had never really seen past his surface?

Rihan had never enjoyed trying to probe the minds or intentions of others. Once you began to doubt people, you never stopped. He felt narrow-minded and unpleasant when he doubted others.

With his luggage packed, the Minister of Revenue headed to the door, coming to stand face-to-face with Keiyu.

“I’m leaving the palace in your hands while I’m gone,” Rihan said.

“Where’s this coming from?” Keiyu asked, surprised by his fellow minister’s serious expression.

“Outside of Chancellor Shu, you’re the one His Majesty can rely on most in a situation like this. Ryo Renka’s only just become Minister of Personnel. I’m sure there’s still plenty she doesn’t know how to do. Everyone in the palace will be on edge for the next ten days as we prepare for war. We can’t let the Ho House learn we’re waiting for the prefectural armies either.”

They’d been lucky that Shusei had granted them a ten-day reprieve.

Why would he go and do something like that though?

Kojin too had been more than a little concerned with that very question and had thought about it endlessly. But Shohi had chosen war. They could analyze the situation as much as they liked, but they needed to act. These ten days would mean they could prepare for war, knowing they could rely on the prefectural armies.

But keeping that knowledge from the Ho House was essential. If they learned that the emperor was waiting for reinforcements, it wouldn't be a surprise if they moved before the ten days were up.

"I'm not sure I'm the man you want to trust with such things," Keiyu quipped while shaking his head.

But Rihan trusted in the intelligence hidden behind his fellow minister's irreverence. From Keiyu's flippant attitude, it was hard to believe he had a great mind, but since their student days, Rihan had always felt the man was simply hiding it.

"I said what I said because I believe it," Rihan grunted.

Keiyu's eyes widened at first before he looked away with a sheepish smile.

"I see. That's how you've always been, hasn't it? I've always appreciated your naivete."

"I'm off," Rihan said as he pushed past Keiyu.

Late that night, under cover of darkness, the ministers of Revenue and Works left the palace with official letters from the emperor.



Some hours before the ministers departed, Shusei arrived at the chief general's war tent outside the palace.

The encamped soldiers had gathered to cook. Thin plumes of smoke could be seen rising throughout the plaza, obscuring the starry sky behind a faint haze. Knowing no battles would be breaking out soon, the soldiers were apparently enjoying a leisurely dinner.

The air inside the chief general's leather tent was stuffy. It was even more

oppressive when compared to the crisp autumn air outside. Further offending Shusei was the fact the general was being attended by a pair of what appeared to be prostitutes. The garishly dressed women laid on a large bed in the back where they giggled and poked at each other.

At a round table in the center of the room, the Minister of Justice and the chief general were happily chatting as they reviewed a floor plan of the palace. The pair suddenly seemed annoyed as Shusei entered, but they both bowed.

“Lord Ho, what a rare honor to receive you in a place like this,” the chief general said. Suspicion was written plainly on his face. The Minister of Justice scrutinized Shusei as well. Shusei was already aware of why they were so displeased.

“You two seem unhappy. I can tell from your expressions that you’re eager to go to war right away,” Shusei observed with an apologetic smile.

The pair exchanged an uncomfortable glance.

“With all due respect, Lord Ho, we are still unconvinced,” the Minister of Justice said. “Why would you give the emperor ten days to decide? Two, three days at most should be plenty.”

“Oh, did you not realize my plan?” Shusei asked with a smile.

“Plan? What plan could require a ten-day reprieve?”

“I suppose I should explain. Before that, though, let’s have our...friends leave the tent. You should have someone stand guard outside as well, so no one can approach.”

At Shusei’s request, the chief general reluctantly sent the prostitutes away and prepared a guard.

“I’ve done as you ordered,” the chief general said somewhat peevishly as he bowed.

“We’d like an explanation,” the Minister of Justice said with a sharp gaze. “Why did you give him ten days?”

Shusei sat down beside the table and calmly crossed his legs.

“I granted His Majesty a ten-day reprieve to ensure he decided to fight,” he

said.

The chief general and minister both looked shocked.

“Fight?! You *want* him to fight?!” the chief general snarled.

“Isn’t a peaceful abdication the best outcome for us?” the minister asked, his voice raising slightly. “Why fight? And why do you think a ten-day reprieve will make him decide on war?”

“Why indeed? I will start with your first question,” Shusei said, raising his index finger. “Why intentionally go to war? The answer is exceedingly simple. If His Majesty quietly abdicates, how do you think the people will view us? They will see us as traitors who used force to remove him from the throne. They have sympathy for the downtrodden. Even if we do establish a new emperor, if His Majesty has the people’s support, our reign will be on shaky ground. But if he resists, we can say we met him on equal terms and won.

“Further,” the scholar continued, “if he abdicates without a fight, it would take time to create reasons to execute him and his followers. Executing them without a reason would make the Ho House an object of fear. But we cannot allow them to live either. And if they must die, then it would be most convenient for us if they died in battle. I intend to settle things with a clean sweep.”

As the chief general listened to the placid way Shusei said such things, he gulped.

“A clean sweep? But His Majesty has the support of Chancellor Shu, your father,” the general said.

“Indeed. That includes my father,” Shusei said, coldly. “He is simply the man who raised me. I don’t have any anger or ill will toward him, but he is in the way. I would prefer to keep things clean.”

The Minister of Justice shuddered.

“To your second question, why would ten days lead the emperor to decide on war?” the scholar asked, raising a second finger. The candle on the table cast flickering shadows across his cheek. “If we grant him only two or three days, he wouldn’t have the manpower required to resist us. Only a fool would enter a

battle like that. He would have no choice but to abdicate. But with ten days, His Majesty would potentially be able to muster the necessary soldiers. And if he can do that, then I believe he will fight.”

“What makes you think he’ll fight?” the Minister of Justice asked.

“His Majesty has begun to be aware of his role as emperor. He understands he can’t just hand the throne to a man he can’t trust.”

“And where do you think he’ll get the troops from?” the general asked.

“The prefectural armies.”

Both the chief general and minister gasped and went pale.

III

“The prefectural armies?!” the Minister of Justice yelled.

Unlike his panicked counterpart, the chief general was sullen.

“His Majesty *did* convince them to step down during that Kan Cho’un business. If he was able to establish a cooperative relationship with them after that...” the general groaned.

“The more distant prefectures might not make it, but with ten days, the armies from An and its neighbors may march straight for the palace. If His Majesty intends to use those forces to fight us, I suspect we’ll be on equal footing.”

“But if you knew that, then ten days makes even less sense!” the minister snapped. “Why not six or seven days? Then we could be sure they’d never make it in time.”

“As I already said, if the emperor believes they won’t make it, then he won’t fight,” Shusei explained. “If we want him to fight, it’s vital that he thinks he has a chance.”

“But if the prefectural armies arrive in time, we’ll be fighting with even forces. How do we win like that?” the general asked.

“That’s why we need soldiers His Majesty hasn’t accounted for,” Shusei said.

“And where are we going to find that sort of manpower?” the minister asked, completely lost at this point.

“We’re going to gather them,” the scholar said.

Shusei reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a leather sack. He opened and upturned it, spilling a small mound of gold onto the table.

“Gold?” the minister asked. The general stared wide-eyed.

“Indeed. A fraction of what we have.” Shusei motioned at the entrance with his chin. “I have twenty carriages waiting outside, each loaded with trunks of gold.”

The minister and general both appeared stunned.

“I sold Ho assets to a trader in Koto. I want you two to spend the next ten days using these funds to hire soldiers in and around the capital. If you emphasize that it’s a short-term contract and pay them upfront, I imagine you’ll find many willing to fight. If all goes well, I’d assume you can gather five or six thousand troops. With a several-thousand-strong ambush force, even if the prefectural armies make it in time, we should still crush them.”

The chief general stared dumbfounded at the scattered gold on the table. The Minister of Justice managed to tear his gaze away to look up at Shusei.

“I’d heard you were the greatest scholar in Konkoku, but...well, I’m glad you’re not our enemy,” the minister said.

Shusei smiled.

“Can I trust you to gather the troops and be ready in ten days?” he asked.

“Yes, my lord,” the minister said.

“I’m counting on you. If you can gather five or six thousand men, our troops will number nearly forty thousand. Far more than His Majesty expects,” Shusei said. He then bowed politely and departed the tent.

The scholar worked his way through the soldiers as he left the plaza and boarded a black-lacquered carriage that awaited him. After only a short moment, someone outside rapped on the carriage door.

“Enter,” Shusei said.

The small door swung open, and a slender man slipped inside. It was the man who’d visited Shusei in his chambers that morning. He dressed as one of the Ho House’s servants, but he was actually a spy that Shusei had been employing for some months. A man without beliefs or principles, he was only devoted to money.

“That’s the only way anyone will hire you in this line of work,” he’d coolly explained.

Shusei needed someone he could rely on, and this man’s loyalty to money was absolute. His lack of convictions made him trustworthy. It was ironic.

“What is it?” Shusei asked.

“I’ve received news regarding the letter you sent. It’s making its way. There is nothing to worry about,” the spy reported.

Despite himself, Shusei broke into a smile. His spy looked at him curiously.

“Is the letter that important?” he asked.

“Indeed. The plan hinges on it,” Shusei said.

“I will let you know when it arrives then.”

“Thank you. You may go.”

The spy bowed his head and slipped back out of the carriage. Shusei waited a moment before opening the window’s curtain and knocking on the ceiling, the cue to depart.

The dark of night was beginning to fall across Annei. In some places, merchants had already hung lanterns out from their eaves.

“Now I believe we can fight.”

The scholar watched the citizens go about their nightly routine from the racing carriage’s window. His preparations for war were nearly complete.



After getting permission from the Bureau of Sacrifices, Hakurei retrieved the books stored in the cuisinology hall and brought them to the Palace of Northern

Peaks. Finding information on the Quinary Dragon would take time, and they could hardly stuff the four consorts into the cuisinology hall, so they'd decided to move the books instead.

Although the four consorts seemed annoyed with the mountains of books cluttering the reception hall, they quickly started searching through them. Consort Yo kept herself busy with simpler duties like bringing tea and sorting the books.

"I was thinking about going to see His Majesty. You should come with me, Rimi," Hakurei suggested, stopping the consort, who had been following Yo around. "You won't be able to read any of this anyway, right?"

Hakurei had been educated in the palace, so Rimi had hoped he would be more knowledgeable than the four consorts regarding the Quinary Dragon. However, the eunuch hadn't so much as touched a book.

"You're not going to help look through these books, Master Hakurei?" Rimi asked.

"I will if I find the time. But first, I need to see His Majesty. I want to know what he and his council have decided. So, come on," he said, apparently deciding for her. Not having much choice in the matter, Rimi bid the four consorts farewell and followed after the director.

The hours had apparently slipped away without Rimi even realizing it. The palace was engulfed in the night's silence, and the scent of cold dew hung thick in the air. Insects swarmed and chirped around the walkway pillars and beneath the closed, slumbering blooms of the bellflowers.

Just as the pair set foot near Shohi's chambers, they spotted the emperor and Jotetsu coming their way. Rimi and Hakurei both bowed.

"Are you upset with me, Hakurei?" Shohi asked apologetically.

"I'm not sure what you mean," the eunuch responded.

"You told me an emperor should not be the one to go to his servants. In spite of that, I left for Koto to bring Kojin back and didn't tell you. Are you upset that I ignored your advice?"

“You brought him back, did you not?” Hakurei asked after a moment’s silence. “I don’t believe there was anything wrong with your judgment.”

Shohi appeared to be relieved and smiled.

He really is such a little brother, caring about what his older brother thinks.

The emperor seemed like a troublemaker scared of what his older brother might say.

“More importantly, you seem to have finished conferring with Chancellor Shu and your ministers. May I ask what you decided? The four consorts are curious as well,” Hakurei asked, pursuing Shohi as the emperor went into his chambers. Rimi followed behind.

Jotetsu entered last, and Rimi noticed he looked puzzled. She glanced over to see what had captured his attention and realized he was looking at Hakurei’s back.

Master Jotetsu? What is it?

Porridge bowls still sat on the table inside the room with Tama sprawled out between them. She was lying belly up with her eyes closed. Shohi froze in place when he saw the little dragon.

“Tama!” Rimi yelped, clapping her hands on her cheeks. Fearing the worst, the consort rushed over and scooped the dragon into her hands. “Tama! Tama! What’s wrong?! Wake up!”

Tama opened her eyes at Rimi’s tearful shrieks and blinked.

“Tama?!”

“*What? What’s the matter?*” the dragon’s big blue eyes seemed to inquire. Shohi, Hakurei, and Jotetsu all peered down at Rimi’s hands and then exchanged dismayed glances.

“It seems it just fell asleep,” Hakurei said.

Jotetsu nodded and pointed at the dragon’s stomach.

“Yeah, look at that big, round belly. I’ll bet it just overate and nodded off,” the spy said.

Shohi breathed an immense sigh of relief and dropped himself onto the sofa near the rear of the room.

“Don’t scare us like that, Quinary Dragon,” Shohi said, slumping against the armrest. “Especially not at a time like this.”

Tama sluggishly righted herself in Rimi’s hand. Her stomach seemed to bother her as she clambered onto the consort’s shoulder.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have made such a fuss,” Rimi said. She felt somewhat responsible for the dragon overeating as well. But Shohi dismissed her with an unconcerned wave.

“It’s not your fault the Quinary Dragon’s a glutton. But this doesn’t mean it’s in poor health like before, does it?” Shohi asked.

Regardless of how much she’d eaten, it did concern Rimi a little to see the dragon in such a deep sleep.

Is there something wrong with her that I just missed?

The last time Tama had fallen ill, Rimi had learned that divine dragons could be exhausted by human emotions. With so much turmoil in the palace, it wouldn’t be surprising if Tama was weakened.

If war actually breaks out, will she be able to handle it?

They might need to find a safe place to shelter Tama if that was the case. Perhaps the four consorts’ research would turn up something on that as well.

“I don’t think she’s sick, but we may need to keep an eye on her. In Koto, she did something I’d never seen before too,” Rimi said.

“By which you mean...”

“After you and Lord Ho spoke at the Autumn Garden, I think I heard Tama say ‘it is decided.’”

“‘It is decided’? What’s that supposed to mean?” the emperor asked.

“I don’t know. I don’t think Tama really knows either. We’re looking at documents from the Bureau of Sacrifice to get some idea. Well, the four consorts are, at least.”

“The four consorts?” Shohi echoed.

“Ah! I’m sorry, Your Majesty!” Rimi apologized, bowing. “I told them that Tama is the Quinary Dragon. I was hoping they’d help.”

“After some consideration, I approved of it,” Hakurei added. “The four consorts had already begun to suspect something regarding the Quinary Dragon. I thought it would be better to just confide in them and obtain their assistance.”

“Fine,” Shohi said with another dismissive wave. “We probably should’ve let them know sooner anyway. If anyone can be trusted, it’s them. So? Have you learned anything?”

“We’ve only just started looking into it, so I don’t actually have anything to tell you yet,” Rimi said apologetically.

Shohi’s shoulders slumped, and he wanly smiled.

“Well, hopefully, it’s a good omen. We’re going to war, so I could use one right now.”

Rimi’s jaw dropped at the emperor’s casual admission. Hakurei’s eyes widened.

“You said we’re...going to war?” the eunuch repeated.

“Yes, we are,” Shohi answered solemnly.

That had always been a possibility, but hearing those little words slip from the emperor’s mouth sent a shiver up Rimi’s spine. It was like a distant nightmare had suddenly become a reality.

Hakurei’s expression was blank as he processed the news. Finally, he asked a question.

“When will you declare war?”

“Shusei’s said he’s giving me ten days. I plan on getting the most I can out of those ten days, and when they’re up, I’ll issue the declaration,” Shohi said.

“Do we have any chance of victory?”

“We do.”

The emperor sounded confident, but even Rimi knew their side was at a disadvantage. If there was no hope of victory, Shohi and Kojin would never choose war. They must have had some reason to be hopeful. But even so, war would undoubtedly be dangerous. It felt like Shohi's confidence was purposeful. He wanted to dispel the air of tension and encourage himself.

"Only the chancellor and my ministers know I intend to declare war," Shohi continued. "To make the most of this reprieve, we need to pretend we're struggling with the decision until the very last moment. I don't mind if you tell the four consorts. I'll be going to the rear palace tomorrow to explain things to them."

"Very well. I shall make preparations for your arrival," Hakurei said, then smiled. "Would you like some tea, Your Majesty?"

It was like Hakurei could see the tension hiding within Shohi. The emperor's expression softened.

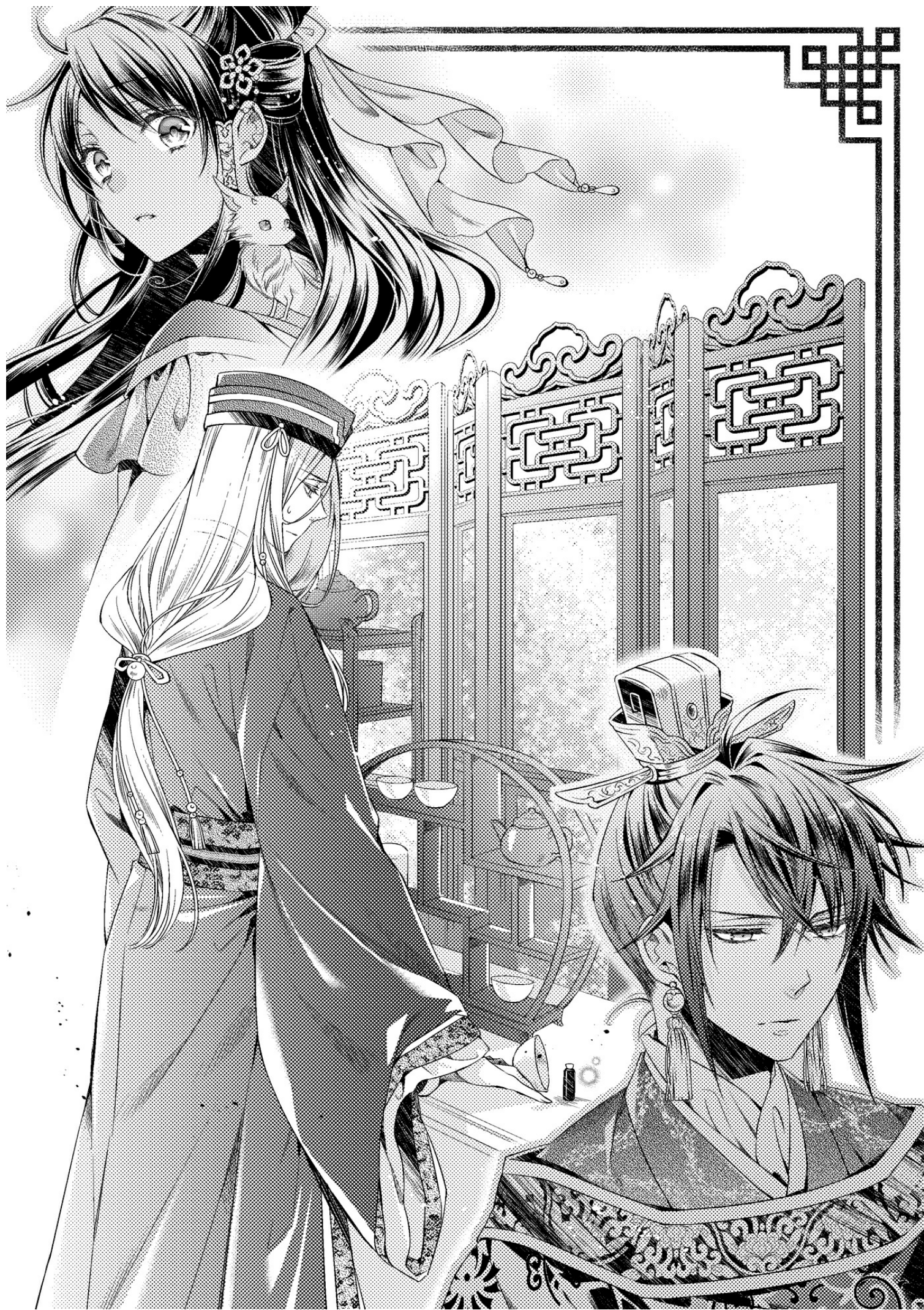
"Yes, I am thirsty, now that you mention it."

As the eunuch bowed and turned away, Rimi grew flustered. Hakurei was the director of the rear palace. If anyone should've been preparing the tea, it was her. Rimi followed him to the alcove hidden behind a partition screen where the tea utensils were kept.

"Master Hakurei, surely I should be the one making tea," she said.

"No, I will," the eunuch said, shaking his head. "If you want to help, could you fetch some hot water?"

Maybe since his little brother was making such a big decision, he wanted to be the one to serve the emperor tea? Rimi could hardly fault him for that. She left the nook to go fetch some hot water. However, just as she was leaving, she heard the clatter of glass. The consort casually turned around and saw Hakurei had knocked over a teacup. But sitting near the fallen cup was an unfamiliar black vial about the size of a thumb.



What's that vial?

It was unusual, but the consort didn't pay it much mind as she left to get the water. Tama seemed curious about something though and kept her gaze fixed on Hakurei from atop Rimi's shoulder. There was a deep, inquisitive sparkle in her blue eyes.



A chill ran through Hakurei.

Rimi had reacted to the clatter of a teacup and turned around. The eunuch's first instinct was to hide the vial lying near his hand, but he'd worried that the wrong move would just bring her attention to it. In the end, he simply acted as if nothing was wrong, and Rimi left to get the water. Hakurei was relieved to see she didn't seem concerned by it.

A glance through the partition confirmed Shohi and Jotetsu were over by the sofa. Hakurei opened the bottle and poured a single drop of transparent fluid from the vial's slender neck. He then moved the cup slightly away from the others.

This will make three. The first two attempts didn't show much in the way of effects. It's definitely something slow acting.

Rimi returned with a pot full of hot water. Hakurei prepared tea for everyone, set it on a tray, and stepped out from the alcove. After giving everyone else their tea, Hakurei went to the sofa and handed the emperor his cup.

"Enjoy, Your Majesty," the eunuch said.

"You aren't joining us?" Shohi asked.

"It is inappropriate for one such as I to drink before the emperor. I'll have mine behind the partition," Hakurei said with a smile and watched as Shohi took a drink.

I know you're someone close to His Majesty, Mars. Well, here you go. See how he does, Hakurei said silently to the man who had tried to stir his ambition with the black vial.

Chapter 3: The Four Consorts' Radiance

I

When Hakurei finished serving the tea and had put away the utensils, he prepared to depart for the rear palace. Rimi readied herself to leave with him.

"I will excuse myself, Your Majesty," she said, stopping in front of the sofa to offer a slight bow.

"Wait," Shohi said and grabbed Rimi's hand as she started to leave. "Stay with me. If I have you here, I think I can actually get some sleep. That's all I want."

Rimi felt uncomfortable as the memory of them falling asleep together popped into her mind. She felt too humbled and strangely nervous by the idea to simply say "Sure, that's fine."

"If you're with me, I think I can calm down," he begged.

Shohi hadn't slept a moment during their long, bouncy ride back to Koto the night before. And when he'd tried to nap that afternoon, he'd mentioned not being able to sleep. Unsurprising, considering how the pressure must have been affecting his nerves. The hours to come would be even more agonizing as well.

If the emperor didn't eat and get proper rest, he would quickly fall apart. He likely realized that and was doing whatever he could to calm himself and get some sleep. Rimi was basically no different from a comfortable pillow or some favorite doll.

"I understand, Your Majesty. I'll stay," she said.

Shohi gave a relieved smile. In that moment, he seemed far younger than his years. Hakurei exasperatedly smiled and promised to have a sleeping robe sent over for Rimi before he returned to the rear palace alone.

Last time, they'd fallen asleep in Shohi's bed without changing, but Rimi changed into the sleeping robe this time, hoping to have a comfortable night's sleep. Unfortunately, it only made her more uncomfortable. The robe was

made of thin silk that did little to hide her body. When the lights were extinguished and Rimi lay in bed, she felt incredibly nervous. She could feel the warmth of Shohi's skin right through the silk.

Meanwhile, Tama gave a big yawn and curled up in a ball above Rimi's head.

A single candle remained lit in the living room, and its flickering light cast through the folding partition door to reveal the profile of Shohi's face beside Rimi. He was breathtaking.

The consort continued staring at him for a while before the emperor suddenly spoke, although he didn't open his eyes.

"Rimi? Are you awake?" he asked.

"Yes. What is it?" the consort asked.

"Can I take you—"

"T-Take me?!"

"...in my arms. I mean nothing strange by it. I just want to embrace you as I sleep. I think I can relax like that," Shohi finished saying.

"Oh, ha ha, you mean as in, say, the way you'd embrace a pillow or a piece of wood?"

"I'm not in the practice of embracing pieces of wood, but yes, that's the basic idea."

If Rimi had been clad in armor, she'd have gladly told him to enjoy himself. But the only thing covering her was a flimsy piece of silk. She felt deeply reluctant, but if that was what Shohi needed to sleep, she couldn't say no. With some hesitation, she nodded.

"I don't mind," she said.

Rimi turned over, and Shohi wrapped one arm around her waist and the other around her back, pulling her close. He tucked his head beneath the consort's chin and squeezed her tight. She tensed as she felt his body heat with only her robe as a barrier.

The emperor didn't move any further. He simply sighed and closed his eyes.

What do I do now? He seems at ease, but I couldn't be more nervous!

Still, despite Rimi being more awake than she'd ever been, Shohi seemed deeply relaxed. After a while, she could hear him softly snoring beneath her chin.

Did he manage to fall asleep?

She glanced downward. Sure enough, he'd fallen asleep with his mouth slightly agape. He looked like a child when he slept. Apparently, he really did just want to innocently cling to her like a baby, like a child eager to be held by his mother on a stressful night.

Rimi gently caressed his head. He was like a needy little brother.

After the previous night's exhaustion, Rimi fell into a deep sleep. It was near dawn when she blearily opened her eyes and realized Shohi was gone.

"Hnuh?" she murmured in a sleepy daze.

At that moment, he returned from the living room. Perhaps he'd been thirsty and needed something to drink. Rimi was too tired to think about it and went back to sleep. The next time she awoke, the room was bright, and Shohi slept soundly next to her.

The emperor woke up, told her he had slept well, and right after having his breakfast, he prepared to go see the four consorts.

Even after Rimi and Shohi got up, Tama remained curled up in bed. The consort decided to leave her there and let her sleep. The dragon seemed tired, but there was nothing to be done about it at the moment. The pair left Tama in the bedroom and departed together for the rear palace.

"Well, this is something," the emperor said.

The reception hall was packed with piles of books. The four consorts sat amid the piles on chairs and at tables, absorbed in their reading. However, true to form, they stopped and came to greet the emperor with graceful, courteous bows. Shohi stared intently at the soft trains of their gowns as they swept through the mounds of dust-caked books.

“You seem to be doing good work, my consorts. You have my appreciation. There is something I need to tell you. Raise your heads and come sit here,” the emperor ordered.

Shohi wove his way between piles of books and took a seat at the table. The consorts followed his cue. Rimi stood off to the side, and Hakurei stepped away for a moment to prepare the tea.

The four consorts, despite doing their research surrounded by musty, grimy books, had maintained their pristine appearances. In fact, they had gone above and beyond. The scents of their individual perfumes gently mingled with the smell of ancient books.

All four of them had unusually tense expressions as they awaited the emperor’s words.

“It has probably reached your ears already, but those who support the idea of a Ho emperor are now pushing for my abdication,” Shohi explained.

Consort Ho’s lips pursed, and she regretfully dropped her gaze to the table.

“Forgive me, Your Majesty. I am ashamed of my house for doing something so disgusting,” she said.

“What your house does has nothing to do with you. Don’t let it bother you,” Shohi said gently. “In nine days, Shusei will come to me with an ultimatum: abdicate or go to war with the Ho House. After conferring with my council, I’ve decided to fight. Nobody knows about this decision but Kojin and my ministers, and no one must suspect it. But I have decided to make you all aware of it. In war, young women often find themselves the victims. I believe the four of you can keep a secret, so you have my permission to leave the palace. Think of somewhere safe you can go before war breaks out.”

Realization dawned on Rimi.

Of course. He’s telling them to flee. That’s why he wanted to come here right after making his decision.

Rimi herself had never even considered fleeing. But when war came, the palace would probably be sieged, and everyone inside would find themselves caught up in the battle. Maybe it would be best for the four consorts to leave

before it came to that.

But suddenly, Yo looked down and stifled a laugh. The other consorts began to shake too, as if trying to stifle laughter.

They're laughing? Why?!

"Stop laughing, Yo," So said.

"You're being rude," On said.

"Control yourself," Ho said.

All of them were barely containing their own laughter.

"I just told you we are on the brink of war. Do you understand that? What's so funny?" Shohi asked, eyebrows raised in anger.

"It's just, we talked a lot last night, and we guessed you'd say exactly that. It's just funny," Yo said between giggles.

"Lady Setsu came to us last night and told us you were handling things calmly, which was a relief," On said, grinning. "And while we were researching, we got to talking about what sort of decision you'd make with a cool head."

"We guessed you ultimately wouldn't approve of a Ho taking the throne and would decide on war. And if it came to that, you would probably come to suggest we flee to safety," Ho said, looking at the emperor with a steady gaze.

"And we've already decided what our answer to that is. We're staying. You have recognized us as your vassals. Well, what sort of vassal runs when their master is in danger?" So declared somewhat angrily.

From the very beginning, the consorts had vowed to stay by Shohi's side no matter what happened. The night before, they'd been playing instruments in the Palace of Northern Peaks. They would never have been able to play in the face of a possible civil war, not without some measure of resolve. As they played music to calm people's spirits, they'd clearly already decided to do anything they could to help the emperor.

Rimi was dazzled by the looks in their eyes.

They're so proud and heroic.

It was exactly what made them the noblest women in Konkoku. While all of them had their own circumstances, the women assembled here were the essence of radiance.

“But don’t you see the danger—”

“Please, spare us,” So said, cutting off the emperor’s rising panic. “Whatever danger there is, your sworn vassals should meet it with you, man or woman. If you’re telling us to flee because we’re women, it means that’s all you see us as. But we have sworn an oath. Does a sworn servant run in the face of danger?”

Shohi looked stunned. It seemed he was beginning to understand that the four consorts viewed an order to flee as an insult. The emperor was unable to hide his astonishment at their bravery and resolve.

“All of you... Are you certain?” he asked. Shohi stared each consort in the eyes, and each responded with a nod.

“You have my thanks,” the emperor murmured, seemingly overcome with emotion. His admiration for their intelligence, bravery, and self-determination was obvious in his voice.

“It’s not worth thanking us over, Your Majesty. We’re just doing what comes naturally.” Yo smiled. She suddenly turned to Rimi, as if she’d just remembered the future empress. “Ah, but what about you, my dearest? You’re technically in the middle of your enthronement, but you don’t have any official position right now. You’re from Wakoku too. It’s a lot easier for you to get away than us.”

Shohi, surprised, looked back at Rimi. Apparently, the idea had never occurred to him.

“You might be right, now that you mention it. But I hadn’t even considered it,” Rimi said.

“You don’t want to flee?” Shohi asked.

“I am staying by your side, Your Majesty,” she said with a warm smile. “I wouldn’t dream of doing something that’s never even crossed my mind.”

“Well then, nine days gives us plenty of time! We can research while you make us snacks!” Yo said as cheerfully as she could, apparently trying to lighten

the mood.

“A good idea. I’d love something tasty. It feels like I haven’t had a proper meal in days,” Shohi said, matching the Pure Consort’s tone with a smile. He gazed out at the gardens, checked the position of the sun, and smiled.

The Palace of Northern Peaks’s gardens were dressed in fall colors. Golden lace, pampas grass, and pink dianthus gave them a modest beauty. Among all the flowers, the purple bellflowers were the most eye-catching.

“It’ll be lunch soon,” the emperor said, as if speaking to the bellflowers. “I’m awfully hungry. Rimi?”

“Leave it to me!” Rimi said, jumping out of her seat.

I can’t believe he said he’s hungry!

Since departing for Koto, Shohi had eaten nothing more than a bowl of porridge the night before. And even then, it seemed like he was eating out of obligation. Rimi was delighted to hear his appetite had returned.

“Wait just a minute, you two!” So said, thrusting her palm out to interrupt. “We’re cooking for His Majesty too. When we heard Princess Aisha from Saisakoku made sweets for him, we decided to do some studying of our own.”

“Really?!” Rimi asked, eyes sparkling. All of the consorts replied with proud grins.

Just then, Hakurei returned with the tea.

“Well well, everyone seems to be in a good mood. Did I miss something?” he asked as he poured tea and placed it before Shohi and the consorts.

“Apparently, the four consorts are going to cook for me,” the emperor said. He reached for his teacup with a smile.

“Are they? How unusual,” Hakurei said.

“I’m a lucky man,” Shohi replied, bringing the cup to his mouth. As he did, his hand began to shake and the teacup slipped from his hand, splashing tea across the table.

“Your Majesty!” the four consorts shouted in unison as they jumped up from

the table. Each pulled a handkerchief from her sash to clean the emperor's hands and sleeves. Rimi rushed to his side as well.

"I suppose I lost my grip," Shohi mumbled. He looked surprised.

Rimi checked his hand. His fingers were trembling slightly.

What's wrong with his fingers?

"Allow me to fetch you some fresh tea," Hakurei said from behind Rimi as he leaned over and collected the fallen teacup from the table. The eunuch was composed as usual, but so much so that it almost felt unnatural. As if this wasn't unexpected to him.

The thought nagged at Rimi as she watched Hakurei go. As he returned to where the tea utensils were kept and prepared more tea, she thought she caught a glimpse of that black vial again.

"Rimi, give me your handkerchief," So demanded.

Flustered, the future empress returned her attention to the present and handed over her handkerchief. When she glanced back at Hakurei a moment later, there was no black vial in his hand.

Did I imagine it?

"You really don't need to make a fuss. A little tea on my clothes is hardly a disaster," Shohi said. "I'm more concerned about lunch. Rimi, consorts, I'll leave it to you."

"Of course, Your Majesty," On said with a confident bow.

Yo clung excitedly to Rimi's arm.

"To the kitchen, dearest!"

II

Consort Yo, dragging Rimi by the arm, led the other consorts to the Palace of Northern Peaks's kitchen.

The palace had an entire building dedicated to the kitchen. It was outfitted with ten stoves, five wash stations, and two wells. The palace was, after all, the

personal home of the empress. It was a magnificent kitchen, ready to handle any sort of banquet the emperor might attend.

But despite how magnificent the kitchen looked, it appeared rustic compared with the four consorts present.

It feels like seeing a phoenix land in a potato field.

While Rimi was trying to set aside the feeling of incongruity, the four consorts tied up their sleeves and began preparing to cook. It seemed they truly had been learning. The way they tied their sleeves was a bit clumsy, but they managed to do it without any help.

The four consorts' handmaids gathered around the entrance of the kitchen and nervously watched everyone work. Their anxiety made Rimi a bit concerned.

"Well, ladies? What are we making?" the future empress asked as she finished preparing.

The four consorts exchanged confused glances.

"What do you mean, 'what?' All we know how to make is youtiao," Ho said.

It was unsurprising. Just because they'd been practicing didn't mean they would know a wide range of dishes. But youtiao, a type of fried pastry, was often accompanied by porridge and tang, making it a commonly served item. It was a good first choice. As more of a staple food, they weren't a true "side dish," though.

"If you can make youtiao, then that's perfect. In that case, I'll come up with something to go with them. I'll whip up something that will make them taste even better."

"That's exactly what I like to hear, Lady Setsu," So said. She then turned to address the handmaids at the entrance. "Go get ingredients for youtiao. Ah yes, and bring all of the ingredients from our palaces as well."

So's sharp instructions were encouraging. Of the four consorts, she seemed to be the most interested in cooking. She seemed so alive. It made Rimi excited too.

What should I make? His Majesty is facing war. I want to make him something both delicious and enjoyable to eat. It should elevate the youtiao too.

Youtiao were made of wheat dough that had been fried in oil. They were crunchy on the outside and fluffy on the inside. There were essentially two types, depending on whether you added sugar or salt to them.

I need one dish with a good liquid base like porridge or tang. Something with sweet-and-sour sauce might be good too. It would go great with the youtiao and certainly transform their flavor.

When the flour arrived, the four consorts peered into the bag and began working out what needed to be done. Since they were essentially all beginners, they weren't very skilled at the mechanics of cooking. Experienced cooks wouldn't have four people inspecting the flour, but checking what the others were doing was a good way to make them less anxious and helped avoid mistakes.

While trying to measure the flour, someone sent a plume of white dust into the air, drawing an adorable sneeze from On.

"Oh, come on! What are you doing, Yo? You spilled it! Here, give me the cup," So ordered.

"Okayyyy," Yo said, hanging her head as So snatched the measuring cup from her hand.

"Carefully now, So," Ho said nervously.

"I know, I know," So said with a serious nod.

"Remember to level it," On added earnestly as she propped up the bag.

Rimi lit up a stove. With a hot stove and cooks working, the kitchen had come to life. It was becoming a place where warm, happy things were born.

I should make porridge with kengyoken and umifu. With some dried shrimp and a little seasoning, it would go perfectly with salted youtiao. A light porridge would offset the heaviness of the youtiao as well. For the other dish, I think chicken with sweet-and-sour sauce would be good. The sweet-and-sour flavor would be a nice counterpart to sugared youtiao.

As Rimi stood up from checking the stove's heat, On looked over at her with eggs in each hand.

"Have you decided what to make, Lady Rimi?" she asked.

"Yes, I'm making two dishes. Porridge and sweet-and-sour chicken," Rimi said.

"Oh, I love sweet-and-sour sauce!" Yo exclaimed as she scooped sugar from a pot.

"It's not for *you*," Ho said, making the Pure Consort shrink in discouragement.

"Huh? But, His Majesty's going to invite us to eat with him anyway, right?" Yo asked.

"You're disgusting. You shouldn't go in there expecting that. Now hurry up and finish measuring that," So chastised.

While Rimi selected ingredients, she smiled to herself.

It's nice not doing this alone.

Thinking back, Rimi realized she'd always had to cook alone in Wakoku. It was her duty as Umashi-no-Miya, which had given her the sense that cooking was just something you did by yourself.

But ever since coming to Konkoku, she'd been blessed with opportunities to cook alongside others. It was nice to fully absorb oneself in the act of creation, but there was something special about cooking in a lively atmosphere.

It was fun to be in a bustling kitchen with the four consorts.

I'm so happy to be here with them.

The consorts always managed to smile and make things fun, no matter where they were. They didn't seem as if they'd care if they were in the rear palace or a ramshackle hut in the middle of the countryside.

Well, Consort So might have some complaints about being in a hut.

Rimi laughed to herself as she imagined So's look of disgust. On would be in a panic, trying to comfort So, and Yo would just be delighted about the change of scenery. Ho would probably get right to work cleaning the place up.

The future empress chopped her ingredients, poured them into a pan, and

began to sauté them. While the consorts cooked, she performed some other preparations.

The four consorts carefully continued with their work. They put down flour, kneaded the dough, and then formed the individual pastries. As they began dropping the pastries into the oil, they shrieked and cried as if they were facing their deaths. Rimi stood ready to jump into action if needed. However, they ended up frying all of them without needing any help.

The youtiao were a bit overcooked and smelled slightly burned, but the four consorts still looked pleased with themselves as they stared down at the plate of pastries.

With the handmaids' assistance, they brought the two dishes and the youtiao back to the reception hall. As they returned, they found Shohi had gone for a walk in the gardens with Hakurei. The emperor noticed the consorts' return and made his way back inside, but he stumbled a bit as he stepped up to the walkway and had to reach out for a pillar. Still, he quickly righted himself and stepped inside.

"...Are we planning on holding a banquet?" Shohi asked, looking at the mountain of youtiao in astonishment.

"We made youtiao for you! Please, eat up!" Yo said, waiting eagerly for the emperor's reaction.

"I'll eat what I can, but there's far too much for me to enjoy alone," Shohi said with an overwhelmed smile. "Consorts, Rimi. Hakurei, you too. Come sit and eat with me."

"I am a eunuch, Your Majesty. I mustn't eat at the same table with you and the four consorts," Hakurei said.

"I'll allow it," Shohi said with a glare.

"But the four consorts would need to—"

"You don't mind him sharing a table with you, do you, my consorts?" Shohi asked.

Rimi's gaze shot to Ho. At Seika Castle, she'd believed Hakurei had insulted

her and had despised him ever since. Hakurei casually glanced at the Virtuous Consort. He was apparently concerned about her reaction as well. Ho looked briefly at him, and their gazes met. She seemed torn for a moment and made an awkward expression but finally spoke.

“I don’t mind. Do you?” Ho asked the other consorts.

Huh?

Shocked, Rimi looked at Hakurei, who seemed surprised as well. The director made an expression that was difficult to read.

“Of course, I don’t mind at all. I’ve had tea with him before in unofficial situations,” So said. Yo and On both nodded in agreement.

“Then it’s settled. Sit,” Shohi ordered.

Hakurei responded with a faint, shy smile.



Mars isn’t showing himself.

Shusei had given Shohi ten days to make a decision. Since the head of the Ho House had already prepared for the war to come, he had nothing to do but return to his estate and pass the time. After the brutal journey to Koto, he was exhausted. By the time he awoke the next morning, the sun was already high.

A handmaid, determining that Shusei had awakened, came to offer him breakfast. Having no appetite, he requested nothing more than a bowl of porridge. But even that was too much of a chore to eat, so he stopped after taking a few bites.

That was when, as he gazed at the bamboo outside his room’s window, he pondered the oddity of Mars refusing to show himself during this momentous event. As a supporter of the Ho House, this was the sort of situation where he should’ve been coming to inquire about Shusei’s plans and intentions.

Mars didn’t seem the type to leave Shusei be simply because the scholar was busy. If he needed to, he was brazen enough to interrupt Shusei in the middle of a bath while the mysterious man wore that white, leering mask.

Which means...of course. It’s not that he won’t come. He can’t come.

Shusei had decided some time ago that he needed to figure out Mars's true identity. He was not so naive as to think he could let a mysterious figure get close without a second thought.

The ten-day reprieve he had given Shohi would also serve to draw out Mars's identity. Shusei had already surmised the schemer was likely someone with access to the palace. By using the reprieve, the scholar believed he would get a better idea of what position Mars held.

With the imperial army applying pressure, the emperor was essentially besieged. If Mars was unable to simply leave in a tense situation like this, then it meant his absence would be noticed. Whoever the masked man was, he was important.

He must be someone close to the emperor.

Shusei sat down at his desk and glanced at his porridge, which was steadily growing cold. The surface had turned dry and lost its luster. He found it wholly unappetizing.

I want to eat something good.

But no matter how Shusei tried, he couldn't think of anything that sounded good. Nothing he thought of stimulated his appetite.

"Excuse us, Lord Ho," came a boisterous voice.

Shusei looked up to see the chief general and Minister of Justice bowing outside his door. With the general's large build and square shoulders next to the minister's small, slender build, they almost seemed like father and son. The scholar slowly rose from his seat to welcome them.

"Please, come in. What brings you here so suddenly? Has something happened?" Shusei asked.

The pair seemed obedient as they entered. The Minister of Justice produced a wrinkled letter from his pocket.

"This morning, someone dropped this from the palace walls into our encampment," the minister explained.

Shusei took the letter and opened it. The writing was incredibly

crude...perhaps intentionally, to hide the handwriting of whoever wrote it.

The emperor has chosen to fight. They are awaiting reinforcements. Strike quickly. Mars.

"A letter from Mars, I see."

"Indeed," the minister said with a nod. "And as you can see, it appears the emperor is waiting on the prefectural armies."

"He's acting just like you thought he would," the general said with a trusting gaze. "I'll be honest, I'm surprised how sharp your instincts were."

The praise brought Shusei little joy. The crux of his plan was still to come. No matter how well the early phases unfolded, if his final goal wasn't achieved, there was no point in any of it.

"I say we forget about waiting the ten days and strike tomorrow," the minister said, eyes gleaming cruelly. But Shusei shook his head.

"If we strike before the ten days are up, it will ruin the Ho House's reputation," Shusei explained. "The people won't follow someone who goes back on his word. And if the prefectural forces remain, we'll be portrayed as the villains. We could end up facing a new dominant threat from the provinces. It could shatter the empire into pieces. Our only goal should be to prove that the Ho House is the just and correct replacement for the Ryu House."

"But..." the Minister of Justice started to complain.

The man seemed cautious, though perhaps it was more timidity than caution. Shusei attempted to appease the anxious minister with a smile.

"Trust me, I will not let victory escape us. In nine days, I will go to the palace to confirm His Majesty's intentions. When I return with his declaration of war, I want you to be prepared to attack immediately," Shusei said. He turned his attention to the general. "How many soldiers do you think the Ho House's funds will be able to gather? Do you have any idea?"

"I don't have specifics, but we've had a huge number of volunteers this morning. Six thousand is possible," the chief general replied confidently.

"Split them into groups and position them at key points along the roads

leading to Annei,” Shusei ordered. “We’ll be able to know immediately when the provincial armies start to move. Even better, if the terrain’s in our favor, we’ll be able to stall their movement even with a smaller army. If we can halt them for a few days, even one day, it should be enough. The emperor’s forces won’t last a day when we attack. The palace will be ours by sundown.”

“Yes, I see!” the general roared. The man was renowned for his bravery but had no actual combat experience. It seemed merely preparing for battle was enough to excite him. It was only natural since Konkoku hadn’t faced a war within or without in the last ten years.

“I’ll leave things in your hands,” Shusei said.

“Yes, Lord Ho,” the pair said before bowing and departing.

Shusei immediately went to his desk, pulled out a sheet of paper, and dipped his brush in ink. He wrote a simple letter and carried it to the rear of the estate. A man emerged from the stables holding a bucket and accompanied by the snorting of horses. It was Shusei’s spy. Upon seeing his master, the man silently approached.

“How may I serve you, my lord?”

III

With his mind set on war, Shohi had gone to the rear palace to inform the four consorts. It was normally Jotetsu’s job to accompany the emperor, but there was no way the spy would be allowed into the rear palace.

Since he found himself with time to spare while awaiting the emperor’s return, Jotetsu decided to pay Kyo Kunki a visit. Kojin had apparently ordered Kunki to captain a group of guards and protect the emperor if war broke out.

For Jotetsu, the emperor’s safety was paramount. It mattered more than winning or losing the war. If it looked like the battle was going to take a bad turn, he’d have to get the emperor to safety. Right now, he needed to consider the best way of doing that.

The biggest concern was that Shohi might refuse to evacuate in the face of defeat. He wouldn’t be able to bring his vassals or the four consorts with him.

To get the emperor to safety, they would need to keep their party as small as possible. But Jotetsu doubted Shohi would approve of abandoning his servants or consorts.

“We’re not going to have time to persuade His Majesty when enemies are closing in on us. What should we do?” Kunki asked.

The young guard sat across the table from Jotetsu in one of the palace guardhouses. His arms were crossed, and he had a pensive look on his face. The bodyguard was ruggedly built, a stark contrast to his smooth, civilized face. It seemed he had completely shrugged off the exhaustion from their forced march between Annei and Koto.

“I guess I’ll just have to give him a good shot across the jaw and carry him out while he’s limp,” Jotetsu responded with a grin as he rudely kicked his feet up on the table.

“How could you even say something like that?” Kunki said, eyebrows raised at the spy’s brazen behavior.

“A couple of bruises are better than a dead emperor, don’t you think?”

Kunki’s jaw dropped at the response. Jotetsu lowered his feet back to the floor and leaned forward over the table.

“You’ve gotta be ready, Kunki. I don’t care if it’s Shu Kojin, the four consorts, or Rimi. If things go wrong, we’re gonna have to leave them to die. The only person we’re here to protect is His Majesty. We’re getting out of here with him, no matter who we have to sacrifice to make it happen.”

“I don’t know if I’m capable of something like that. I just know I’d end up stopping to help them.”

“I know. That’s exactly why I’m here saying this. Remember what your job is, Kunki. Protecting His Majesty. You need to do whatever it takes to make that happen.”

“...I understand,” Kunki said, his face turning slightly pale. “You really wouldn’t feel any hesitation about letting people die?”

“It’s not like I’d be happy about it, but I’d do it. My duty is His Majesty’s

safety.”

As Jotetsu rose from his seat, Kunki looked up at him with a mixture of fear and admiration.

“You have such powerful loyalty,” the bodyguard remarked.

Loyalty? Is that what it is?

Jotetsu wasn’t so sure. Was his desire to protect Shohi born out of a servant’s devotion to his master? Not to say he wasn’t devoted to the emperor, and Shohi had been doing a good job of ruling lately.

But Jotetsu had never really had much respect for rulers. Sure, he liked to see good governors who did their best, but he was hardly going to crawl on the ground for them.

In his youth, Shohi had needed Jotetsu, and that had made the bodyguard happy. Protecting and serving the wimpy little emperor had become his place in the world. He just couldn’t help wanting to take care of Shohi.

I’m just like Rimi. His Majesty gives me somewhere to belong. It makes me want to protect him. Really, it’s for my own sake.

That was probably why he was capable of sacrificing anyone to protect Shohi. It was self-serving. Jotetsu’s willingness to lay his own life on the line was just more selfishness. He wanted Shohi to live, even if it meant ignoring the emperor’s wishes, because that was how he found meaning. Shohi could cry about how he’d rather die all he wanted, but Jotetsu would do anything to keep him alive.

“I never imagined the cuisinologist would do something like this,” Kunki sighed. “Chancellor Shu’s son always seemed more interested in research than politics. He’s the last person I would’ve expected to get caught up in a war of ambition.”

Jotetsu snorted at Kunki’s grumbling.

“You and everybody else,” the spy commented.

“There were times he frightened me though,” Kunki said, his gaze growing distant. “He called himself a cuisinologist, but I don’t believe the Ministry of

Rites would grant a whole building for a single man to pursue his field. But sure enough, at some point, that library had been renamed to the cuisinology hall and was being used for his research. He didn't throw His Majesty's name around. It just sort of...happened. I always thought he was good at that kind of scheming. It was fine when he was using it to pursue cuisinology, but I was afraid of what would happen if he used it for evil ends."

No kidding.

It had managed to slip Jotetsu's mind too since Shusei had always been so gentle. Who knew how much the scholar was capable of?

Maybe me and His Majesty were both too naive. We trusted that kindness too much.

"Well, he's our enemy now," Jotetsu said, standing up with a sigh. "Keep your guard up."

Kunki responded with a dutiful nod.

Jotetsu left the guardhouse and headed down a road leading alongside the castle walls. It was the fastest way back to the Hall of the Rising Dragon, but since it was essentially a backstreet of the palace, nobody was around.

The towering castle walls were made of tightly packed stones and reinforced with a plastering of mud, which was beginning to crack in places. At one of the points where the mud was cracking and peeling away, a twig with a single leaf was sticking out. It looked like someone had been vandalizing the wall.

"Huh..." Jotetsu said as he caught sight of it, stopping in his tracks.

He approached the twig and looked in the direction it was pointing. It appeared to be pointed at the rear of a warehouse used by the Ministry of Personnel. A lone, slender plum tree stood nearby. Jotetsu approached the tree, and as he looked up, he noticed a small cavity in the tree. The spy felt around inside the hole and felt something papery. It was some sort of letter.

Now, who the hell would be doing this?

For those who called themselves spies, others in the profession could sometimes be allies and sometimes enemies, depending on their employer. At

times, spies who'd never met would work together. Their kind had certain signs to facilitate those sorts of alliances. When you found a sign where you were working from someone you didn't know, it meant someone wanted to contact you.

This sign hadn't been there when Jotetsu had gone to the guardhouse. Someone had guessed he'd be returning this way and wanted to get in contact.

Jotetsu unfurled the letter and looked over it. As he read what was written, his expression turned gloomy.



Though their only hopes of victory lay with the reinforcements from the prefectures and Saisakoku, Kojin and the others were still doing everything they could to prepare for battle.

Since they would be encamped and defending the palace, it was vital that they had enough food stockpiled. However, Kojin didn't anticipate a long siege. Holding the palace would require an enormous number of reinforcements. Even with the prefectural armies coming, they wouldn't provide enough men to crush thirty thousand enemy troops in a single blow.

We'll likely need to abandon the palace when the prefectural forces arrive. It would be best to leave the city and head into the provinces of An where His Majesty is more trusted. We'll be able to regroup there, rally our forces, and attempt a counterattack.

But until reinforcements came, they would have to defend the palace to their last breath. Any weak points would have to be found and reinforced. They would also need to decide where to station troops and decide on evacuation routes if the worst came to pass.

Most importantly, they had to do everything they could to carry out their duties without raising attention. It was too early for the enemy to know that the emperor had decided on war.

From the top of the palace's front gate, Shu Kojin surveyed the surrounding areas. He was accompanied by Keiyu. In spite of the thousand men encamped outside the palace, things were rather quiet.

“Eight days left,” Kojin murmured.

The south of the palace was occupied by soldiers, but the east and west were clear. There were smaller gates in each direction, but they were secured with iron doors and too small for a large army to push through. To the north lay the rear palace, forming the northernmost point of the imperial compound.

The towering Mount Bi, dedicated to the gods of Heaven, sat to the north of the rear palace. Around the mountain was a rocky wasteland, which eventually led to the Red River.

“It appears their only path of attack is through the front,” Keiyu observed, eyes squinted against the dusty southern wind.

“Couldn’t they split their forces in two and attack from the north and south?” Ryo Renka asked from behind them.

Kojin turned around to see Renka ascending the gatehouse’s stone steps. She had a paper-wrapped youtiao in each hand, one of which she was nibbling on. It was rude to walk around eating like that, and Kojin narrowed his eyes at her poor manners. Renka didn’t seem to take any notice of his displeasure though. Instead, she offered the untouched youtiao to Keiyu.

“A gift from the director. Apparently, they had too many. Want one? The four consorts made them,” Renka said.

“Well well, if it isn’t the Minister of Personnel,” Keiyu said with a theatrical bow. He accepted the pastry. “You said the four consorts made these? How unusual. Don’t mind if I do.”

“Here, you too,” Renka said, offering her nibbled youtiao to the chancellor. Unlike Keiyu, he turned his nose up at it.

“I don’t need your leftovers. Don’t you have any shame, eating in a place like this?” Kojin asked.

“You’re missing out. They’re a little burned, and there’s still some flour on them, but they’re pretty good,” Renka said. “However, more to the point, what happens if they attack from the north and south at the same time?”

“I see a pincer attack as unlikely. Shusei would think it too dangerous to place

troops to the north.”

“Hmm. And what makes you say that?”

“Shusei will believe we’d never go to war unless we had reason to believe we could win,” Kojin said. The moment the words left his mouth, he gasped.

“What is it?” Renka asked with a puzzled tilt of her head.

“Shusei. He may already know that we plan to fight. No...could it be? The whole point of these ten days may be to push His Majesty toward fighting.”

“What do you mean?” Keiyu asked curiously between bites of his youtiao.

“With ten days, we can gather reinforcements. So, what if that’s what he wanted? And if Shusei wants to push His Majesty into war...”

Renka and Keiyu exchanged shocked looks. They were both intuitive enough to understand.

“You’re saying Lord Ho wants to wipe out everyone in his way, His Majesty included?” Renka mumbled, staring at her youtiao. “That he’s willing to sacrifice some of his own forces in battle if it means eliminating you and His Majesty?”

“Ridiculous,” Keiyu said with a chuckle. “Shusei can’t be that cruel, right?”

Kojin could do nothing but stand in silence.

Would Shusei consider doing something that cruel?

In all the years Kojin had known his son, the boy had never seemed like that sort of person. But the chancellor couldn’t discount the idea that he himself had warped Shusei. Even if his hatred for Kojin were to disappear, it didn’t mean his twisted thinking would simply go back to normal.

Kojin couldn’t really say what drove Shusei anymore. Perhaps he just had a new way of viewing the world and was trying to crush his enemies based on his new perspective. Kojin felt no hate or anger at that. Just pity. But he wouldn’t allow himself to be defeated out of pity.

We can’t afford to lose to someone who threatens the stability of Konkoku.

This was going to be an exchange of lives. If Kojin failed, Shusei would happily step on his corpse to reach the throne. And if Shusei failed, Kojin would have no

choice but to execute his son and weep as he held the boy's severed head.

I'm sorry, Seishu. My crimes are catching up to me. I'm sure of it.

Whatever the outcome, it would've broken Seishu's heart.

The chancellor sighed softly before speaking.

"We have to prepare for the worst-case scenario. Let's assume Shusei knows we're waiting on reinforcements. Even if we do receive reinforcements, it will be dangerous for them to approach from the south. The city will essentially become a wall. But with the wasteland to the north, we would be able to bring our full forces to bear," Kojin explained. "If the Hos attack from the north, they're in danger of being crushed by our reinforcements mid-siege. I think Shusei will focus his assault on the south. His rear will be covered because we can't move a large army through the city."

"Reinforcements, eh? I wonder how Rihan's doing," Keiyu mused as he began to nibble on his youtiao again.

"Are you missing your partner?" Renka quipped.

"I suppose I am," Keiyu said with a smile. "It's like when you constantly have something by your side. You get fidgety when it isn't with you."

We should be fine if Rihan and the Minister of Works make it in time, but...

The dry, dusty wind whistled as it swept past Kojin's ears.

What is it that drives you now, Shusei?

Kojin couldn't understand it. He'd watched over the boy his whole life and couldn't comprehend where this new ambition had come from. It made him frustrated with himself.

"Well, I'm headed to see the Vice Minister of Revenue. Have to work out what we're doing for the next eight days. Rihan left things in my hands, so I don't have much of a choice," Keiyu said as he finished his pastry. He turned to descend the stairs, only for Setsu Rimi to pop up out of the stairwell. "Oh my. Rimi? What is it?"

Keiyu smiled amiably at the consort, who finished climbing the stairs and offered a small basket she was carrying.

“The four consorts made youtiao, and I brought extras from the rear palace,” Rimi said.

“They really must have made a lot. As it happens, I just had some that Renka gave me. But Chancellor Shu hasn’t had any yet, so why not give it to him?” Keiyu said. He then passed Rimi, descending the stairs with a small wave goodbye.

Rimi gave a casual bow to the departing minister before turning to the chancellor. She seemed nervous but showed no hesitation as she approached and offered the basket to Kojin.

“You haven’t had any yet, Chancellor Shu? Please, take one,” she said.

“Always playing the cook, no matter where you go,” Kojin spat.

“Well, yes. I’m a cook,” Rimi said. She seemed confused by his disgust.

This girl really seems to have no awareness of her role as future empress. Empty-headed as ever.

Shusei had signed a contract with the gods to protect this empty-headed girl. Kojin had believed she was the most important thing in the world to his son. And she seemed to feel the same way about Shusei. They had been in love.

But how does he see her now?

As Kojin looked at Rimi, wondering what form his son’s love had taken, she seemed to grow a bit uncomfortable and tilted her head.

“So...would you like some youtiao, or...?” she asked.

“Come on, your scowling is making her uncomfortable,” Renka said. She took one of the youtiao from the basket and thrust it beneath Kojin’s nose. “Go on, eat. This one isn’t one of my leftovers.”

With the pastry shoved in his face, he had little choice but to take it. Rimi seemed pleased at that.

“How do you think Shusei sees you now?” Kojin asked. When he saw her smile, the question just slipped out of him. Rimi’s expression clearly stiffened at the mention of Shusei’s name, and the chancellor cursed at himself. Renka gave a sidelong glare, as if to call Kojin a heartless brute.

“I believe Lord Ho doesn’t think anything of me anymore,” Rimi answered honestly, her voice small.

“And what about you? Do you still have any feelings for Shusei?” Kojin asked. Hypothetically speaking, if the pair were still in love, it wasn’t inconceivable that the consort might betray Shohi at the last moment. It was hard to imagine the empty-headed girl being capable of that, but he wanted to confirm it.

“Kojin, what the hell are you thinking, asking something like that? I know what you’re worried about, and it’s stupid,” Renka chastised sharply, but Rimi shook her head.

“Thank you, Lady Renka, but Chancellor Shu is just trying to protect Konkoku. It’s only natural he’d be worried,” the consort said. She stared Kojin in the eyes. “I loved Shusei, the kind cuisinologist. But the Shusei I loved is dead. ‘Lord Ho’ has killed him. When I look at him now, I don’t see Shusei anywhere. That’s how I feel, at least. But what about you, Chancellor?”

Rimi’s expression suddenly turned to concern.

“What do you mean? What about me?” Kojin asked.

“You love Shusei, after all.”

For a moment, Kojin was lost for words. Renka chuckled at his response.

“Do you still find him dear to you, Kojin? He certainly looks like Seishu, but he isn’t half as sweet. Can you still love this ‘Lord Ho’ as a son?” the minister taunted.

He didn’t let Renka’s words shake him. He decided to look inward and ask himself that question. Truthfully, there was still part of him that adored Shusei. Unlike Rimi, he didn’t have the sense that this Shusei had killed and replaced the old one. But why was that?

After thinking for a moment, Kojin replied.

“I can’t tell what he’s thinking. And since I can’t read his thoughts, I can’t really make any sense of him. But that’s exactly why I don’t think the Shusei I loved is gone. Without knowing what he’s thinking, I don’t have any proof this is a different Shusei.”

“The proof’s in his behavior. This isn’t the kind cuisinologist we’re dealing with,” Renka replied.

“But I don’t know the reasoning behind his behavior.”

“What a pushover of a father. You won’t abandon your love for your son until all hope is lost,” Renka said, clearly disgusted. She wrapped an arm around Rimi’s shoulder. “Forget about this softy, Rimi. Let’s take those youtiao over to Kyo Kunki.”

As she was pulled away, Rimi looked at Kojin as if there was something she wanted to ask. But she also seemed torn, as if she wasn’t sure *what* she wanted to ask.

The chancellor pulled his gaze away from the pair as they departed and looked out at the Hos’ encamped soldiers beyond the wall.

Shusei...you say you want stability, but you invite civil war. I don’t know how you arrived at that thinking. Is Renka right? Are my feelings as a father clouding my judgment?

Kojin couldn’t say.



As Rimi left with Renka, she glanced over her shoulder at Kojin. Her heart ached at the sight.

Chancellor Shu believes the old Shusei is still there. Because he’s a father.

“Kojin’s feelings run deep. I guess they don’t disappear easily,” Renka muttered.

Chapter 4: The First Night

I

From the moment the four consorts had learned of Shohi's decision to fight, they had spent their days in the Palace of Northern Peaks, buried in books. They were so reluctant to part with their work that they continued their research while in bed. Rimi came to the rear palace several times a day to thank the consorts with sweets.

But three days had passed, and they had discovered nothing.

Autumn was progressing quickly. The evening air was growing chilly, and the maple leaves in the garden were changing color.

"This would be easier if you could just talk to me, Tama," Rimi said, stroking the dragon's fur as she sat on the sofa in the emperor's chambers. Shohi was in his office, meeting with his council.

I wish she could communicate like she did at Castle Seika.

As that thought passed through Rimi's head, Tama turned her big blue eyes toward the consort, and she let out an inquisitive squeak.

"Can't you try talking, Tama? Or spell something out with letters like you did at Castle Seika?" Rimi asked.

The little dragon responded with a sorrowful squeak.

Apparently, communicating with words or letters was no easy feat for her. Rimi didn't believe that Tama wanted to make the consort's life harder, so it was more likely that there were simply things she couldn't do. Castle Seika had been brimming with spiritual energy. Without a place like that, maybe some things were just too much to ask.

Even when Tama had said "it is decided," the dragon herself didn't seem to understand the meaning of it. How was a human supposed to guess?

“You look out of it, Rimi. You worn out? It must be rough, spending night after night with His Majesty,” Jotetsu commented as he entered the room, clearly amused by his own teasing.

“Please don’t put it so strangely, Master Jotetsu,” Rimi said.

The consort had been unable to return to the Palace of the Water Spirit, so at Shohi’s request, she’d been spending every night in his bed. But, like the first night, nothing had happened. He simply slept soundly.

Jotetsu grinned as he hopped up on the windowsill and crudely propped a leg up.

“Far as I see it, it’s a miracle he hasn’t done anything,” the spy said.

“His Majesty told me he wouldn’t do anything inappropriate.”

“I sure as hell wouldn’t be able to do that. I’m nothing but inappropriate,” Jotetsu said, puffing out his chest.

“Is that something you should be proud of?” Rimi asked, a bit shocked by his demeanor.

A while later, Shohi returned to his room. Right after entering, he came straight to Rimi and sat beside her. He heaved a sigh, slumped back in the seat, and stared at the ceiling.

“Are you tired, Your Majesty? May I pour you some tea?” Rimi asked.

Shohi turned his gaze to her, then softly pet the dragon sitting in her lap. The movement of his fingers was a bit stiff and clumsy.

“No, not tired. My body just feels heavy,” the emperor replied.

“Well, it is cold out. Let’s light a brazier.”

Jotetsu took that at his cue to stand and fetch a large, white porcelain brazier. He had apparently managed to find some live coals somewhere, as Rimi could see a red glow within the container as the spy set it down near them.

While Jotetsu worked to build the flames, Rimi closed the doors and windows. The room began to slowly warm after a while, and Shohi’s expression softened.

Jotetsu seemed lost in thought as he sat down beside the fire.

“What is it?” Shohi asked, apparently concerned by his bodyguard’s pensiveness.

“What? Oh, nothing,” Jotetsu said, looking up with a start. “I just remembered something.”

“Remembered what?”

“I’ll show you. Give me a moment.”

Jotetsu left the room. He wasn’t gone for too long before returning with a handled earthenware pot, a wooden spatula, and a plate. The pot was small and shallow, usually used for roasting beans or seeds. It was filled about a third of the way with some sort of clear liquid.

Jotetsu placed the pot over the brazier. Before long, bubbles began appearing on the surface of the liquid, which he took as a cue to start stirring it with the spatula. A sweet aroma began to rise from the pot, and the clear fluid began to take on a slightly golden color.

Tama’s head popped up at the smell. She hopped down from Rimi’s lap and climbed on the sofa’s armrest to get a better look.

“It’s candy,” Rimi said.

“I used to eat this. Shusei always made it for me,” Shohi mumbled.

The consort started at Shusei’s name and looked up at the emperor, but he didn’t seem particularly emotional as he watched Jotetsu’s hand.

“It’s geyi. Do you remember? You always used to want this when you were worn out. It just popped into my head, so I thought I’d make it,” Jotetsu explained. “You can get a darker color if you mix in nuts and let it cool. The Chief of Dining put it together for me and made sure I knew exactly how to make it.”

Jotetsu pulled a cloth sack from his pocket and dropped it into Shohi’s hand. It was full of crushed, roasted nuts. The emperor stood up and went to kneel by Jotetsu.

“Let me. I’ll do it,” Shohi said.

“You, Your Majesty?” Jotetsu asked.

“I think I’d be good at this. The four consorts have been learning to cook. I want to try too.”

Shohi took the spatula and adeptly stirred the mixture. The stuff grew stickier before their eyes, and the brown color deepened. Shohi poured the nuts into the pot, and after blending them into the mixture, pulled the pot from the heat. Jotetsu immediately produced the plate, onto which Shohi poured the pot’s contents.

The sweet scent of candy mixed with the earthy scent of nuts. The fluid oozed out onto the plate, spreading until it was a uniform thickness, at which point it cooled and hardened.

Rimi stood up and went to peer at the plate, which had been laid on the table to cool. The candy glittered in the light, not quite yellow or brown. Bits of white, red, brown, and black—the crushed nuts—were scattered throughout the candy.

“It’s lovely. It looks tasty too,” the consort muttered.

“Want to try some?” Shohi turned around to ask, clearly proud of his work.

“I’d love to.”

Jotetsu produced a spoon and handed it to the emperor. However, Shohi seemed perplexed when he tried to scoop some up. It had hardened, so he couldn’t get any in the spoon.

“I can’t scoop it. Did I do it wrong?” Shohi asked.

Rimi picked up the plate and touched the geyi’s surface. As she did, the candy slipped off the plate in a big disc. It shone a beautiful amber color.

“It feels like you’re supposed to crush this up into something more bite-size. Master Jotetsu, you had the Chief of Dining make it for you, right? If you did everything according to his instructions, then this should be the finished product, don’t you think? It certainly looks like perfectly delicious candy,” Rimi commented.

The real question was why Shohi thought it was supposed to be eaten with a spoon. Jotetsu had prepared one as well. The two men looked at each other.

“Oh, I see. Maybe Shusei was the one who didn’t do it right? His was always darker, and it didn’t harden. You had to eat it with a spoon. It was more like really thick rice syrup,” Shohi suggested with a strained smile.

“Maybe he didn’t measure the ingredients right? It might be hard to get it to solidify. He could have overcooked it to get it hard enough, which would be why the color was darker.”

“I see. So *he* did it wrong,” Shohi said, furrowing his eyebrows.

Rimi broke the candy into pieces and gave some to the two men. Tama eagerly hopped up on the table, so she gave the dragon a big piece as well.

The consort popped a piece of geyi into her own mouth. It was incredibly sweet, easy to chew, and rich with the aroma of roasted nuts.

Shohi rolled his piece of geyi around his mouth before crunching down on it. He made an odd expression.

“It’s certainly good, but I’d like it better if it was softer and more aromatic,” the emperor said.

“Then it would just be one of Shusei’s failures,” Jotetsu quipped.

It seemed Shohi actually preferred the scholar’s failed product. That made Rimi a bit worried, and she looked timidly at him.

“Your Majesty, are you...uncomfortable?” she asked.

“Why would I be?”

“Well, this candy. You said Lord Ho used to make this. I just thought those memories might... Maybe this candy is making you uncomfortable?”

It was no fault of the candy’s, but if it brought back unpleasant memories, then maybe it would be better to let someone else eat it out of the emperor’s sight.

Shohi gazed at the crushed geyi, like bits of amber, on the pure white plate.

“This Shusei is not the Shusei I knew. Something has changed in him. Somehow, I know he doesn’t hate me at all. He only sees me as an obstacle to his convictions. An obstacle he wants to remove,” Shohi explained. “But I can’t

hand the throne to a man obsessed with foolish convictions. Thinking about him doesn't make me uncomfortable. I just think I have to fight him."

There was strength in the calm way the emperor spoke. How painful would it be to decide you had to fight a man who'd been your companion since childhood? It hurt Rimi to think about it.

"I'm...angry at Lord Ho. For making you feel like that," she said.

Shohi's expression suddenly turned quizzical.

"You never say Shusei now. It used to be 'Master Shusei this, Master Shusei that,'" he commented.

"A man who would make you feel like this isn't the Master Shusei I knew," Rimi said and quickly looked away.

Shohi must have been so sad he wanted to cry. He had known the scholar far longer than she had. The shock of his betrayal must have been immeasurable. It crushed her to think that he couldn't or refused to show how he felt.

The emperor seemed to be lost in silent contemplation for some time.

"You're right," the emperor confessed. "At the Autumn Garden, I wanted to cut him down. Even now, I'd drag him before me and force an apology out of him if I could. But when I think of the Shusei who used to make geyi for me, I don't feel angry. I just feel empty. This man isn't Shusei. Maybe the Shusei I knew is dead. Maybe it's someone else wearing his skin. Seeing it like that is easier."

Shohi paused and placed a hand on Rimi's cheek.

"This must be painful for you too," he continued. "It must be confusing to feel like this Shusei is a different man than the one you knew."

That was too much for Rimi. She couldn't stop the tears from overflowing.

You idiot, Rimi. He's the one in pain, but here he is comforting you.

"Don't cry. How am I supposed to cry if you're crying?" Shohi asked.

"I'm sorry, I couldn't help myself."

"I suppose you're crying in my place then."

His kind voice overwhelmed Rimi with the urge to kneel. She clutched his palm to her face with both hands.



He's so kind. I need to protect this man.

Her heart was bursting with trust and gratitude for him. She could think of nothing that would make her happier than finding a way to be useful to him as his servant.

"By the way, I *did* make geyi. Aren't you going to compliment it?" Shohi asked.

Rimi couldn't help but burst out laughing at his playful demand for praise.

I can still laugh, even at a time like this.

If she could laugh in the face of war, surrounded by enemy soldiers, it was only because Shohi was with her. It was precious to be with someone she could share a laugh with. She felt so lucky.

"Yes, it came out perfectly. You must be more talented at cooking than Master Shusei," Rimi said.

"I suppose you're right," Shohi said while proudly nodding.

Jotetsu popped a piece of geyi in his mouth, crunched down on it, and nodded.

"Yep, this is a hell of a lot better than the junk I make," he commented.

Tama was munching away at the candy. She seemed to enjoy it, so after breaking the geyi into appropriately sized pieces, Rimi wrapped them up in pieces of paper and put them in a bowl, which she placed on the table. That way, anybody could have a piece whenever they wanted.

"Excuse me, Your Majesty. I have a letter from the four consorts," came a soft voice from the doorway.

"Enter," Shohi ordered.

"Ooh, something smells sweet," Hakurei said with his usual enchanting smile as he slid the door open.

"I made geyi. Do you want some?" Shohi asked.

Hakurei's stride was graceful as he approached the tableside where Shohi stood. The director bowed reverently and handed over the letter. He then picked up one of the paper-wrapped candies.

“Now, this takes me back,” Hakurei said.

“Do you have memories of these too?” Rimi asked.

“I’d say most people do. Anyone, even children, can easily make them on a brazier. It’s why they’re called geyi.”

“Right. Geyi means ‘older-brother candy,’” Shohi added.

“Indeed. Brothers would often make it for their younger siblings. My wet nurse made it for me occasionally too. There are a lot of fond memories here,” Hakurei said. “Your Majesty, may I offer you some tea?”

“Please,” the emperor nodded.

Hakurei gave a small bow. Just as he began to head for the nook behind the partition, Shohi moved to return to the couch. After a single step, he suddenly pitched forward.

“Your Majesty?!” Rimi cried out and reached the emperor just in time to catch him.

“I’m sorry. I tripped,” Shohi apologized, straightening himself up.

But there’s nothing to trip on...

Something was wrong. While Shohi returned to the couch, Jotetsu slipped casually over to Rimi’s side.

“Have you noticed anything about Hakurei, Rimi?” the spy whispered so only she could hear.

“Eh? No, not really,” she replied.

Jotetsu was glaring through the partition at Hakurei as the eunuch made tea.

Tama, who was happily munching on candy atop the table, suddenly dropped her piece and began to shiver. She darted over to Rimi and crawled under her skirt. It was like the dragon was fleeing some unpleasant noise.

On the couch, Shohi was staring at one of his palms.

“Rimi. Jotetsu,” the emperor called in a somber voice.

The pair turned their attention to the couch.

“Something’s wrong with my eyes. I can’t see very well,” Shohi said, pressing his hand against his eyes.

What?

Rimi wasn’t able to comprehend what he was saying. Jotetsu kneeled by the sofa and placed a hand on Shohi’s knee.

“What do you mean, Your Majesty?” he asked.

“Like I said...I can’t really see.”

“Get a doctor! Hurry!” Jotetsu said, spinning to face Rimi.

The consort flew out the door as if she’d been thrown out.

II

A doctor was summoned to the emperor’s chambers. Once word had spread, Kojin, Renka, and Keiyu appeared as well. While Shohi sat on the sofa and received the doctor’s examination, Jotetsu and Rimi stood off to the side. Hakurei stood near the partition and watched the events unfold.

Everyone present nervously observed as the doctor took Shohi’s pulse, looked into his eyes, and then placed his fingers on the emperor’s neck.

“You said your vision is blurry. How blurry, exactly? Can you make out my face?” the doctor asked.

“I can, but the details are fuzzy. I can just barely make out that the people behind you are people. Everything within arm’s reach is blurry, but I can see. Everything beyond that is just fog,” Shohi said.

“Any other symptoms?”

“My fingers have been numb.”

“For how long?”

“The numbness has been for three or four days. This matter with my eyes appeared just now.”

The doctor made a thoughtful noise and nodded. He then stood and

approached Kojin and the ministers.

“What’s causing it?” Kojin asked with a grave expression.

“I’m afraid I don’t know,” the doctor said.

“You don’t know? What kind of quack are you?” Renka snapped.

“His pulse is normal, his eyes show no cataracts, and I can find no swelling in any of his vital muscles. He shows no signs of illness,” the doctor replied indignantly.

“Then what could be causing it? He clearly can’t see. He mentioned his hands being numb too,” Keiyu said exasperatedly.

“I don’t know. I just don’t know,” the doctor said, furrowing his brows.

“Could it be poison?” Kojin asked plainly.

The question took Rimi aback.

Poison? Don’t be ridic—

Just then, a memory occurred to Rimi. A small black vial she’d glimpsed twice. Both times, it had been near Hakurei’s hand.

No. That’s impossible.

The consort banished the thought. Ever since she’d arrived in Konkoku, there had been a gloom about Hakurei. But lately, everything he’d said and done had been in support of the emperor. He’d even seemed to care for his little brother. The idea of him poisoning Shohi was unthinkable.

“If it’s poison, it’s an obscure and unusual one. I can’t tell you anything concrete. I’ll do some research,” the doctor said before departing.

“All of you need to stop looking so worried,” Shohi ordered as he slumped against the armrest. “It’s not a problem. I’m likely just tired. After a good night’s rest, I should be recovered by morning. I’ll just sleep.”

His expression turned sharp, and he looked at each person present.

“Tell no one that I am in poor health. I don’t want to cause a panic,” he added.

With his message made clear, Shohi dismissed them. He had a light dinner and went straight to bed as he'd planned.

Rimi personally prepared his dinner. Shohi didn't seem concerned, but after Kojin's mention of poison, she was nervous. As long as she was the one cooking his meals, she wouldn't have to worry.

If whatever Shohi was suffering from did turn out to be poison, suspicion would probably fall on Rimi as well if she was preparing his meals. Still, the consort would know she was innocent. It was more important that she be sure Shohi wasn't ingesting poison, even if it meant she would be a suspect.

The emperor slowly made his way to the bedroom, climbed into bed, and embraced Rimi as if it were perfectly natural. They had been doing this for four days now, so the consort had gotten a bit more used to it. Even so, she always remained frozen with embarrassment and nerves until sleep came for her.

"Are your eyes okay, Your Majesty?" she asked.

"I don't know," he replied.

Unlike when he'd dismissed Kojin and the others, his voice was now tinged with worry. Without thinking, Rimi caressed his face.

"Go to sleep," she said.

"You're so kind. It's strange...even when we're like this, I feel no desire to do anything to you. I feel so at peace, like I'm wrapped in a warm blanket. It puts me to sleep."

"I'm glad to hear that. Now, go to sleep."

"Okay," came his quiet response in the darkness.

Why would this be happening to His Majesty? Why when everything is happening?

Rimi's sorrow drove her to caress the emperor's head. As she did, a different thought occurred to her.

Or is it happening because everything is happening?

The black vial flicked through her mind.

Jotetsu was standing guard in the living room. A single candle was lit; its light trickled through a crack in the doorway. Tama was spending the night, curled up tightly on the rafters above the bed. She almost seemed to be on guard.

Shohi's symptoms showed no change the next morning. He said his fingers were still a bit numb and his vision stayed blurry.

Jotetsu frowned when he heard there was no improvement. He left the room, saying he had business to take care of. Tama stayed in the rafters above the bed, curled up and sleeping.

Eventually, Kojin appeared to see Shohi as he ate the breakfast Rimi had cooked.

"Your Majesty, how are you feeling?" the chancellor asked.

"Not particularly bad. But my eyes are still blurry," Shohi replied.

As the emperor brought a spoonful of porridge to his mouth, without warning, the spoon slipped from his fingers. Rimi, who had been pouring him some tea, turned around at the noise. He himself seemed surprised that he'd dropped it. Rimi collected the spoon and set a new one in front of him.

"Your Majesty, you can't pretend nothing is wrong," Kojin said. His expression was placid, but his tone was firm. "If something happens to you, what becomes of Konkoku?"

"Even if illness does take me, I can just leave the governing to you," Shohi said.

"I am just a bureaucrat. I can't rally the hearts of the people and your vassals like an emperor can. We need you, an emperor who recognizes the strength of his servants and uses it appropriately," Kojin said. He turned his gaze to Rimi. "Your Majesty, I don't know if your condition is caused by illness or poison. The doctor is investigating everything he can, so our only choice is to wait for answers. But since poison is a possibility, I believe it would be best if you only ate food provided by Setsu Rimi."

"I understand. Then I'll do that. Is that all for your lecture?" Shohi quipped.

“One more thing. I ask that you hurry and make an heir.”

Shohi was just reaching for his spoon again, but he stopped and widened his eyes.

“We’re on the eve of war, Kojin. What on earth are you saying?”

“That’s exactly why. If something happens to you, even if we win the war, a Ho will take the throne anyway. All of this would be meaningless. But if you conceive an heir with one of your consorts, even if the worst comes to pass and you are injured or killed, the throne will pass to the child she carries,” Kojin explained. “You said you want to leave the governing to me. If you have a child, I can support their rule just as I’ve supported yours.”

It could be considered disrespectful or threatening to speak of harm coming to the emperor in his presence. The fact that Kojin was willing to speak this way showed the importance of the matter.

Shohi recoiled and looked away.

“But—”

“You see that it’s necessary, don’t you?” Kojin insisted.

Rimi, who was listening beside the emperor, saw the importance of it as well. It was essentially a part of the preparations for battle.

“I was relieved to hear that Setsu Rimi had been sharing your bed. However, Jotetsu informed me you haven’t had her join you to conceive a child. I’m not sure why you’re doing what you’re doing, but I urge you to sire an heir immediately,” the chancellor continued.

Ah, I see. Chancellor Shu hadn’t been worried because he had the wrong idea. Now that he knows the truth, he thinks there will be trouble. He wants His Majesty to make an heir, and quickly.

Suddenly, Rimi went pale.

And by “make an heir,” he means...

The chancellor was basically pushing Shohi, saying that treating Rimi like a security blanket wouldn’t be enough.

“I know I need an heir. It’s just, I’m not quite—”

“Your Majesty, I would never demand anything unnecessary of you. If it were just the war, I wouldn’t force you into this. But on top of the war, something is happening to your body. You understand my concerns, don’t you?” Kojin insisted.

Shohi fell into careful thought. After a while, he nodded.

“Understood. I’ll do everything I can to relieve you of your worries. I’ll start tonight,” the emperor said.

“Thank you,” Kojin said with a deep bow. He then departed.

With the chancellor gone, Shohi fell into a long silence. Rimi was so flustered, she couldn’t look him in the face.

His Majesty agreed...which means...

Though Rimi was still in the middle of her enthronement ceremony, she was the empress-to-be. She wasn’t in a position to refuse. And in a situation like this, it would be like refusing to help the emperor prepare for battle.

“Rimi,” Shohi said.

“Y-Yes?” Rimi said with a start and reluctantly raised her head.

“I want you to sleep with me again tonight,” he said, looking into her eyes. “But...I just can’t think about siring an heir with you.”

Rimi’s eyes widened at the unexpected admission.

“I want to sleep with you, but I’m thinking otherwise regarding an heir. I’ll discuss it with Director Hakurei,” he said.

“What do you mean, Your Majesty?”

“I meant what I said. I want to continue sleeping with you in my arms. I don’t want that to change. But I have other thoughts regarding an heir.”

Rimi stared at Shohi, speechless.

What is he talking about?

Shohi picked up his spoon and began to quietly eat. Rimi hadn’t the slightest

idea what he meant.

“Rimi, summon Hakurei. Tell him it’s about my heir. Can you do that?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

Confused, the consort left for the rear palace.



Kojin’s right to worry.

The earlier Shohi could make an heir, the better. He was already sleeping with the future empress. All he’d need to do was ask. It would give everyone peace of mind.

Shohi understood all of that. But when he glanced at Rimi, something just felt wrong. The consort, who had been standing frozen with her eyes huge and round, would be the mother of his children. He had what he wanted.

But right now, he couldn’t think of doing anything more with her than spending his nights sleeping beside the consort. The feeling confused him. He had the sense that, by doing anything more, he would be destroying what he wanted more than anything in the world with his own hands. And what he wanted from her wasn’t to have a child. It wasn’t sexual. It was something softer, more peaceful, and gentler.

Is it care that I want?

The word suddenly popped into his mind. Maybe that was it. He wanted unconditional, unwavering tenderness. Perhaps he desired Rimi as empress so intensely because he could sense she had a heart capable of soft, warm, and unshakable care. But while that was similar to the role expected of an empress or consort, it felt subtly off.

Rimi did as she was asked and went to summon Hakurei, but she’d looked incredibly baffled as she left. It was a reasonable reaction. Shohi himself was a bit confused.

It didn’t take long for Rimi to return with Hakurei. Shohi dismissed the consort, leaving the pair alone. Hakurei offered a graceful bow before approaching the table.

“Rimi informed me you wanted to speak regarding your thoughts about an heir?” Hakurei asked with an awkward smile.

Shohi put down his spoon. He nodded, dabbing at his mouth with a handkerchief.

“Indeed. I’m in poor health, which has Kojin worried. I need to do something to alleviate his worries. What are your thoughts, Hakurei?”

“I agree. But I’d heard you’ve been sharing your bed with Rimi. I would have assumed you already...”

“We’re just sleeping together. Nothing has happened.”

“Still, if you’re already sleeping together, you could just—”

“Rimi is out of the question. I want someone else,” Shohi said sharply.

“Then what are you planning on doing?” Hakurei asked, perplexed.

“That’s what I wanted to ask. What should I do? I thought you might have an idea of who’s suitable.”

Hakurei turned his amber eyes to his feet in careful thought. After a moment, he looked up again.

“I have an idea. If you approve, I’ll speak with her about it.”



The dry fall air felt pleasant. As Mars stood atop the observation platform protruding from the imperial palace’s main gate, he looked at the thousand soldiers encamped below.

Five days until Shusei comes to hear His Majesty’s decision. Considering word still hasn’t arrived from the prefectural armies, it’s reasonable to assume they won’t make it in time for the battle.

Amused, Mars gave a muffled laugh.

Hakurei’s done well too. Five more days of this, and His Majesty should be in miserable shape.

With the emperor weakened, Shohi’s supporters would be in complete disarray when the battle began. They would soon grow panicked and angry

when the prefectural armies failed to arrive. Mars wondered what sort of faces they'd make as the walls closed in around them. How would Hakurei look when that happened?

So many sights to take in. The anticipation was killing him.

III

After returning to the Palace of Great Purity, Consort Ho flopped down on a sofa and closed her eyes.

"This work is brutal."

The four consorts had been cloistered in the Palace of Northern Peaks and had buried themselves in piles of books as they researched the Quinary Dragon. Ho had grown deeply fatigued in the process. Despite retiring to their respective palaces like this when they became exhausted, the work essentially continued day and night.

Yo had immediately given up on reading, so she spent her time bringing tea and sorting books for the other three consorts. On, the most focused and enthusiastic of them, had spent her time reading in total silence. Ho had been impressed with the Worthy Consort's persistence.

Ho and So, not nearly as resilient as On, took frequent breaks. Even so, Ho'd grown rather exhausted.

The most impenetrable of the books were the ancient Bureau of Sacrifices writings. They were full of complicated jargon related to holy days.

I need to rest a bit and then hurry back.

Rimi had said she'd heard the voice of the Quinary Dragon in Koto. If they could learn what it had meant, they would likely be able to divine Shohi's fate. Hopefully, it was a good sign. The four consorts could ask for no one better than the young emperor. He recognized them as vassals, respected their opinions, and even occasionally sought out their help. None of them wanted to lose their master.

It was a cool autumn afternoon, and the chill breeze swept through the door

and around Ho's ankles.

"Virtuous Consort Ho, the director has come to see you. What shall I tell him?" a handmaid asked as she kneeled in the doorway.

Ho sat up in shock.

Hakurei?!

After his insult at Castle Seika, she had, at first, utterly despised the man. But when he had told her he planned on investigating the Ho House, she had sensed something in him. Hakurei still had the same noble heart.

At Castle Seika, Ho had been unable to contain her feelings anymore and had confessed them to the eunuch. He had pretended to be vulgar to hide the truth and protect her. When Ho had finally realized that's what he had been doing, she became ashamed and angry with herself for treating him so callously.

"Let him in," Ho replied.

The consort peeked in the mirror, fixed a few stray hairs, straightened her ruqun, and sat back on the couch. Hakurei soon appeared in the doorway and offered a perfect bow.

"Forgive my sudden arrival, Virtuous Consort. His Majesty needs something."

"It's fine. Come in. You said His Majesty needs something? From me specifically? Not all four of us?"

"Indeed. From you," Hakurei said. He slipped inside the room and approached Ho. "His Majesty will be arriving at your palace tonight. I ask that you make preparations."

"My palace...? Why?" Ho asked. Her expression suddenly turned shocked as realization dawned, and she looked up at Hakurei. "No! But it's so sudden! Why? He has Setsu Rimi!"

Hakurei kneeled and leaned in so close that his lips nearly grazed her eyes.

"Because he needs you."



After Hakurei had been summoned to the emperor's chambers, Shohi asked

Rimi to excuse herself. She decided it was a good opportunity to head for the kitchen to make preparations for lunch and dinner.

Tama, who had just woken up, apparently sensed the consort was leaving for the kitchen. She came darting out of the bedroom and climbed onto Rimi's shoulder.

Having made preparations for the meals, Rimi also made some steamed treats with brown sugar as thanks to the four consorts for their work. Sweet-smelling steam rose from the plate full of pastries she had made as the consort headed for the rear palace. Tama's eyes were wide and eager as she stared at the plate.

"How about you eat some of these with the consorts when we get to the Palace of Northern Peaks? They're doing all of this for you, after all," Rimi suggested.

Tama responded with a nod.

It was so frustrating that the pair of them could communicate so well without words, yet Rimi couldn't understand that one little sentence.

I still don't understand why His Majesty said he isn't thinking of making an heir with me.

He'd wanted her to be his empress, so he should've wanted her to bear his child too. Rimi felt relieved that he didn't want that but also a bit guilty. She supposed it felt like she wasn't carrying out her duty.

Feelings for Shusei still smoldered within the consort. She still loved the quiet, gentle cuisinologist. But this imposter was somebody different. He might have taken Shusei's name, but the man she'd loved was dead. She still cared and grieved for him, but that was all. She knew there was nothing she could do to change things, which had given her the resolve to do her duty as empress.

But if he doesn't want me to give him an heir, then what is my duty?

"What did you say?!"

A voice rang out just as Rimi entered the Palace of Northern Peaks's reception

hall, which was still crammed with books. Noble Consort So's echoing shriek made Rimi stop abruptly. Tama, apparently surprised by the noise, scurried under Rimi's skirt.

Ho was seated at the reception hall's table while So, Yo, and On were gathered around her.

"I don't understand why it has to be me either," Ho said apologetically. Sensing Rimi's arrival, the Virtuous Consort met her gaze and gave a conflicted smile. "Lady Setsu. What perfect timing."

"Forgive the intrusion, consorts. I brought some sweets. Is something going on?" Rimi asked.

The future empress approached them and set the treats on the table. Normally, the four consorts would be excitedly settling down to eat the moment they saw the plate. Now, however, So, On, and Yo simply stared at Ho with shocked expressions.

"Hakurei came to the Palace of Great Purity a while ago. He told me His Majesty will be coming to my palace tonight and that I should prepare," Ho explained.

"I see. That means His Majesty decided on you then?" Rimi asked with some relief.

"What kind of thing is that to say?!" So asked, raising her eyebrows. "Lady Setsu, *you* are the future empress!"

"I know. But this morning, he told me directly that he doesn't expect me to bear his child," Rimi said.

"What's that supposed to mean?" On asked nervously.

"I don't understand it either. But he was very clear."

"Who ever heard of something like that?" Yo asked, dissatisfied with Rimi's answer.

"It makes no sense to me either," Ho added. "It's reasonable for him to think about producing an heir with war on the horizon, but why not with Lady Setsu? I suspect he might have chosen me because I have Ho blood. That way, I might

be spared when the fighting breaks out.”

“I’m sure His Majesty has his reasons,” Rimi replied with a shrug. It was the only answer she had for Ho’s perplexed expression. “Anyway, why not have some sweets? They’re made with brown sugar. Tama, why don’t you join them?”

The little dragon peeked her head out from the hem of Rimi’s skirt.

“Ohh! The Quinary Dragon!” Yo cried, jumping up and down and clapping. “I never thought much of it when I believed it was just a mouse, but now that I know it’s the divine dragon, I get so moved just seeing it! Come on, come here! Look, there’s treats!”

At Yo’s urging, Tama warily crawled out from Rimi’s skirt and climbed onto the table.

“And you’re just fine with all of this, are you?” So asked with disgust.

Rimi, who was watching Tama with a grin, tilted her head.

“Fine with what?” she asked.

“You’re the future empress, but you’re being set aside in favor of the four consorts! Why doesn’t that make you angry?!”

“Good point. If I’m not doing my duty as empress-to-be, then I do feel ashamed. But that’s all. It doesn’t make me angry.”

Rimi found it strange that Shohi didn’t want a child with her. But that wasn’t a source of anger or anxiety for her. Her faith in the emperor was unyielding. He would never want to cause her despair. He was doing what was necessary, and that made her relieved.

“You’re so accepting, Lady Setsu,” On smiled.

“Don’t you want to keep him for yourself?” So asked, apparently unable to make sense of it.

“His Majesty is the ruler of our land. I don’t think that’s the type of person someone can keep for themselves. Do you want to keep him for yourself, Consort So?” Rimi asked, tilting her head.

“When I joined the rear palace, I did. I wanted to become his favorite, work my way up to being empress, and monopolize his love,” So admitted.

“Oooh, somebody’s ambitious!” Yo teased.

“You little...!” So said as she lightly pinched Yo’s cheek. “What consort hasn’t thought the same thing? You were the same, right, On? Ho?”

“It’s true. That’s what I was taught to do,” Ho said with an embarrassed smile.

“Yes, I believed I could stay in the rear palace forever if I could dominate His Majesty’s attention. I was convinced it had to be me,” On said, similarly aghast at her past self. “But I understand how foolish that is now.”

“So we don’t want to hog His Majesty. But does he want to hog somebody? I figured he decided to make my dearest his empress because he wanted her all to himself.”

“Oh my. Do you understand *anything*, Yo?” So teased with an aloof look.

All of the other consorts, Yo especially, leaned forward curiously.

“What?! So, do you know what His Majesty’s thinking?!” Yo asked.

“Explain yourself,” Ho said.

“Please, tell us!” On pleaded.

“What are you getting at?” Rimi asked.

So gave a self-satisfied laugh before explaining.

“His Majesty *already* has us all to himself. He’s the emperor. He doesn’t have to confine his attention to one person. He isn’t particular like that.”

The consorts all exchanged looks of agreement.

“Now that I think about it, all four of you are like His Majesty. None of you seem mad that he’s chosen Consort Ho. It’s as if no matter who he chooses, you’re all in this together.”

“Yes, I suppose you’re right.” So laughed. “We aren’t very picky, are we?”

Rimi and the consorts all exchanged looks and began to giggle.

On the table, Tama pulled one of the steamed pastries from the plate, agilely

propped it up with her front paws, and began taking big bites out of it.

“Oh!” Yo cried. The sight appeared to have reminded the Pure Consort of something. She darted over to the table, grabbed a sheet of paper, and offered it to Rimi. “That’s right, my dearest. The others have been researching nonstop, and I put together everything they’ve found. I think this might be useful to you. On found something under the category ‘On the Nature of the Quinary Dragon.’”

“What is it?” Rimi asked.

“Supposedly, when the Quinary Dragon is with the emperor, its nature as a divine dragon doesn’t manifest,” On explained. “When its nature does manifest, it’s difficult for the dragon to remain with humans.”

Rimi cocked her head, unable to understand what On was saying.

“In other words, this is only a temporary form for the Quinary Dragon, not its true one,” So explained, breaking things down more simply. “It takes on this pet-like form so it can remain with humans.”

“Then what’s her true form like?” Rimi asked.

“We haven’t found a description yet,” Ho said apologetically. But as she spoke, her tone grew more confident. “However, if the Quinary Dragon itself isn’t aware it spoke to you, then perhaps that’s because it’s in a temporary form. Which would mean the voice you heard came from its true form. They were words descended from its true essence, the voice of Heaven.”

The voice of Heaven.

The weight of it shocked Rimi. What was it that Heaven had decided?

After enjoying the sweets and some tea with Tama and the four consorts, Rimi left the rear palace.

Shohi was in near-constant meetings with his council, so he was rarely in his room. He did, however, come back for lunch. When he returned, he was being led with his hand on Jotetsu’s shoulder. It seemed to be how they were handling the emperor’s poor eyesight. When Rimi had anxiously asked how he

was doing, his response was a simple “nothing to worry about.”

When she served Shohi his lunch, he continued to act like everything was normal. However, he told her that he needed to get back to his meeting right away and left soon afterward. He didn’t return until evening.

Hakurei appeared that evening, apparently timing his arrival for when the emperor was eating his dinner. Jotetsu, sitting on the windowsill, greeted the eunuch’s arrival with a suspicious glare. Tama, who was sitting atop the table sharing Shohi’s dinner, suddenly raised her head.

“I have come to escort you, Your Majesty,” Hakurei said with a graceful bow.

Shohi nodded and stood. He turned back to address the consort before leaving.

“Feel free to head to bed, Rimi,” the emperor said.

With that, he put his hand on Hakurei’s shoulder and was led away.

He’s off to see Consort Ho. I hope he’s feeling okay.

Shohi’s eyesight had shown no signs of recovery. He claimed it hadn’t gotten any worse, but whenever he was going somewhere, he placed his hand on someone’s shoulder. He often dropped spoons and chopsticks as well as knocked over several teacups. The shaking in his hands seemed to have worsened too, though perhaps that was just Rimi’s imagination.

While the consort dazedly watched Shohi depart, she felt a pair of hands land on her shoulders. It was Jotetsu.

“You must be lonely with His Majesty gone. How about I take care of you?” he teased.

“I’m more worried than lonely,” Rimi explained.

“Don’t act all tough,” Jotetsu said in an unusually sweet voice. Rimi turned around, confused.

“You’re sounding very nasally, Jotetsu. Have you caught a cold? It’s been getting chilly at night, after all.”

“Here I was hoping to have some fun, but I don’t think I’m getting through,”

the spy said, disappointedly slumping his shoulders.

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t worry about it. Anyway, you seem pretty calm about all this. His Majesty going to be with Consort Ho and all.”

“I’m worried, honestly. His condition seems so much worse than this morning.”

Shohi had dropped his chopsticks twice during dinner. Jotetsu’s eyes hardened.

“Something’s definitely off. With everything,” he observed.

Just then, Tama began to shiver. Her legs stiffened, and her fur bristled. Something about her movements reminded Rimi of how the dragon had seemed when she’d spoken at Koto.

“Tama!” Rimi cried.

Jotetsu stood up straight and ready.

Rimi attempted to rush over to the table, but as she took a single step toward her, the dragon flinched with her entire body. Tama squeezed her eyes shut and let out a small squeak. After a moment, her fur began to settle, and her taut limbs loosened.

The little dragon opened her eyes and started glancing around the room.

“Tama? Are you okay?” Rimi asked.

She approached the table and offered a hand, which Tama eagerly hopped onto. Rimi stroked the spot between the dragon’s horns and patted her back. Tama responded by happily closing her eyes.

“What’s going on with the Quinary Dragon? Does it do that often?” Jotetsu asked.

“No, this is only the second time,” Rimi said, shaking her head. “She hasn’t done it since Koto. I hope nothing bad’s happening to her.”

It had only lasted for a few moments, but it was enough to worry Rimi.

It was like she was trying to endure something. Is something happening to

Tama's body?

Whatever it was, it was hard to imagine it had nothing to do with Shohi's decision to fight and the war drawing ever closer.



Sweet incense filled the air as Shohi entered the Palace of Great Purity. It was a scent worthy of an emperor.

After escorting Shohi to a room facing out into the gardens, Hakurei bowed and then departed. The emperor steadied himself, and after a moment, he stepped into the room.

Flickering flames atop red candles illuminated the space. In one corner sat a pot full of clover, golden lace, and pampas grass, adding a touch of color to the autumnal night atmosphere. The ebony furnishings all exuded taste. Shohi, appreciating the arrangements, was struck by just how elegant and tasteful a Ho girl could be.

Virtuous Consort Ho was waiting for him deeper within. The way her silk ruqun clung to her body made her seem willowy, like a delicate painting.

"Beautiful," Shohi uttered.

"Your praise honors me," Ho said with a bow.

"Hakurei's explained things, hasn't he? Are you okay with this?" Shohi asked softly after approaching.

"Yes, Your Majesty. Completely," she answered with a sweet smile.

I never imagined our first night together would be like this.

Shohi took Ho by the hand and headed for the bedroom.

Chapter 5: Like Wildfire

I

News from To Rihan, Minister of Revenue, had still not arrived. Everyone who knew the truth of the situation, especially Shohi, was concerned. Even after the emperor had visited Consort Ho, word had still not come.

With four days remaining until Shusei would return for a final answer, Kojin had grown impatient. He had sent a soldier to gather information, but two more days had passed, and the soldier had not returned.

Even so, there was a narrow window for the prefectural armies to arrive in time for battle. But everyone was growing nervous.

Another day passed. Twenty-four hours until the deadline.

Early that morning, Kojin collected the ministers, stating he wanted to hear Shohi's final decision.

"Lead the way," Shohi said to Jotetsu, having the spy guide him to his office. "I need you to be my eyes."

Jotetsu repeatedly asked how well Shohi could see, and he didn't seem pleased with the emperor's hurried replies that he was fine. Jotetsu was a trained spy. No matter how much Shohi tried to hide the truth, Jotetsu could tell something was off. That was likely why the spy kept asking.

As they walked, Shohi recalled Rimi's face. He'd left her in his chambers. Just like Jotetsu, she had seemed terribly worried as she sat and stroked the Quinary Dragon in her lap.

Of course they're worried. So am I.

They'd had no news. Not from Rihan, the prefectural armies, or even the soldier that Kojin had sent. It was practically hopeless to expect the armies to

arrive the next day.

That was the situation in which they would have to face Shusei.

As Shohi entered the office, Kojin and the other ministers offered reverent bows. With Jotetsu guiding him, the emperor came and stood before his council.

“Your Majesty, you’ve likely already heard, but there has still been no word that the prefectural armies have begun to move,” Kojin said, stepping forward.

“Is there any possibility they’re on the move, and we’re just late in hearing about it?” Shohi asked.

“Trust me, Your Majesty. If forty thousand men were moving, we’d be hearing about it. But there’s been nothing,” Renka replied gloomily.

Shohi just nodded.

“Your resolve still isn’t shaken?” Kojin asked solemnly.

“It is not,” Shohi responded, immediately shaking his head. “Perhaps they won’t make it in time, but they may still arrive within days of battle. I’ve prepared myself for that. I know it would be easier to simply abdicate. If I kneel before the Ho House, there’s a good chance they’ll spare my life. But I refuse to destroy all the work that I’ve done and make all the sacrifices meaningless. The Ho House is hungry for conflict in pursuit of power. I don’t believe the people would be happier with rulers like them.”

Shohi had heard firsthand the angry voices of Kan Cho’un and Renka, who had both suffered. If he abdicated now, he might as well have been ignoring their pleas.

A silence settled. Outside the round window, the shadows of autumn leaves rustled.

“I understand, Your Majesty,” Kojin said while slowly nodding. “I’ve already decided how we should respond when Shusei...when Lord Ho arrives tomorrow. Let me explain.”

Shusei met his chancellor’s gaze and nodded. He knew Kojin had never planned to surrender. He was just asking to hear the emperor’s will one final

time to be certain.

“Let’s hear it then, Kojin.”



The next day would be the fated tenth day. At Kojin’s request, Shohi had gone to his office early that morning and didn’t come back out. The palace’s atmosphere was tense. All sorts of orders had been issued. Bureaucrats, soldiers, servants, and handmaids alike were busily and nervously rushing from one place to another.

Meanwhile, Rimi sat in the emperor’s chambers, stroking Tama and awaiting his return. Tama had shown no more strange behavior since her previous episode. She just appeared to be sleeping soundly.

Evening came. Shohi finally left his office, and after eating dinner, he left for the Palace of Great Purity. He had been going there every night, and it appeared he didn’t plan on breaking that routine, even now.

As usual, the emperor spent a couple of hours at the Palace of Great Purity before returning to sleep in his bed with Rimi. The consort was already there when Shohi returned, and he slipped into bed beside her.

His hair smelled like the sweet incense from Ho’s palace. He wrapped his arms around Rimi, and she responded by embracing his sweet-smelling head.

This all feels a bit strange.

Shohi had apparently forgotten to completely close the window, so a slender moonbeam slipped through the slightly ajar window. As Rimi gazed at the beam of light, she wondered how Shohi felt, spending his time with another woman before coming straight to Rimi to be embraced like this. It was probably the sort of thing only an emperor would experience.

Tonight ends the ninth day.

In such a peaceful moment, it was hard to think that the next day would be so fateful. It felt like any other calm night.

But the truth was far crueler. Shusei, as ruler of the Ho House, would come to demand Shohi’s abdication. The emperor had already decided what his answer

would be. Rimi couldn't help but worry over how it would all unfold.

It had been decided that Rimi would take refuge in the rear palace. She'd been told it was the safest place in the palace since the imperial palace's walls bordered it to the north. Furthermore, it had its own set of walls. Since it sat at the northern tip of the compound, it would be possible to escape to Mount Bi if necessary as well. While it was possible enemies could be waiting there, the mountain's presence meant it was unlikely the Hos would position a large army there.

I wonder when reinforcements will come.

Word had reached Rimi that there'd been no news from the prefectural armies. Who knew if they were close or even moving at all?

As the consort gazed at Shohi in the moonlight, something suddenly felt off. She'd learned what he looked like when fast asleep, and his expression was clearly different now. It was like he was pretending to sleep.

"Your Majesty?" she whispered.

He didn't stir, which just seemed even more unusual. Usually, his eyelids would flutter at the sound of her voice.

"Are you awake?" Rimi asked.

Shohi suddenly squeezed her tightly, as if he was begging her to just be silent and lay with him.

Of course he couldn't sleep with what awaited them. He was probably so anxious he wanted to scream. Right now, he was probably just trying to soothe himself by basking in her warmth.

Your Majesty, no matter what happens, we'll be here for you.

In the rafters above, Tama slept in a tight ball.

Shohi left the bed at dawn. Rimi followed soon after him, rubbing her tired eyes and fighting off the haze of sleep.

"I'm glad you're here," Shohi said softly as Rimi helped him dress. "I wouldn't have been able to get through the night without you."

“I’m happy to be of service,” the consort said.

“Take the Quinary Dragon and go to the rear palace. I need to see Kojin and the others. The Ho House stated they would be coming at daybreak. It probably won’t be long. All we can do now is wait.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. Take care of yourself. I’ll be waiting for you in the rear palace.”

Shohi smiled.

After the emperor was dressed and ready, Jotetsu came to get him. Shohi placed his hand on the spy’s shoulder and followed him out of the room.

“Come on, Tama. We need to get over to the rear palace,” Rimi called.

But there was no response from the dragon. Curious, the consort went back to the bedroom, expecting to find Tama asleep in the rafters. Sure enough, the little dragon was there, but she was sitting up. Her tail agitatedly flicked from side to side.

“Come down, Tama,” Rimi said, reaching up with both hands. “His Majesty said we have to go to the rear palace. Come on.”

But Tama seemed hesitant.

“What’s wrong, Tama?” Rimi asked. She patiently waited with arms outstretched, and eventually, the dragon did come down to sit on her shoulder. Still, Tama seemed incredibly on edge.

It’s probably because we’re so close to battle. Maybe she can sense it.

“Sorry we’re making you so nervous, Tama,” Rimi said, tickling beneath the dragon’s chin as they headed for the rear palace.

Tama shook her head, as if to say it wasn’t the consort’s fault.

As they neared the rear palace’s main gate, Tama suddenly jerked and began shivering. Rimi stopped in surprise and looked over to see the dragon with limbs braced and fur standing on end.

It’s happening again!

Rimi immediately raised a hand to take Tama off her shoulder, but Tama

slipped away from her hand and jumped down.

“Tama!”

The dragon raced to a nearby magnolia, climbed to the top of it, jumped to a neighboring tree, and then bounded up to the walkway’s roof. She seemed like she knew exactly where she was going.

“Tama, wait! Where are you going?!”

Something was wrong, and Rimi couldn’t afford to let the dragon out of her sight. If she lost Tama...if she lost the Quinary Dragon now, she was sure it would crush Shohi.

Lifting her skirt, Rimi chased desperately after the dragon.

Where could she be going?

Tama turned to the south and sprinted along the rooftops.

Tama?!



Shusei awoke to the slow dawning of the sun outside his window. While he set about washing his face and rinsing his mouth, a number of messengers from the chief general and Minister of Justice came to inform him of events.

According to the chief general, the imperial palace’s gates had been tightly barred since the day before. Not a single person would be allowed to enter or leave.

According to the Minister of Justice, the mercenaries hired with Ho funds were monitoring the roads surrounding the capital. Every road leading to Annei was being watched, and no great armies had been sighted. Even in the mountains and fields, there’d been no hint of troop movement.

So the prefectural armies won’t make it in time then.

Meanwhile, the Ho House was so well-prepared, they were essentially ready for anything.

As Shusei tightened his sash, his mind began to wander.

It might be best to attack the moment we receive His Majesty’s answer. We’ll

have one thousand men waiting in front of the palace. While they attack from the front, we should have our reserve troops move and attack from the east and west.

The scholar believed a three-pronged attack would likely be the most efficient.

Mount Bi sits to the north of the palace. Even if we had our men come down the mountain, we'd have no choice but to split up our forces. Not to mention, the rear of the mountain is completely open. There's always the possibility of the prefectural armies approaching from that position. If we want to account for every possibility, we should avoid attacking from the north. Besides, if we leave that way open, His Majesty will have no choice but to escape to the north if we corner him.

Naturally, it would be best to position a small ambush force to the north. Keeping that flank small would limit their losses if the prefectural armies did arrive.

Things are overwhelmingly in our favor.

The difference in manpower was so extreme, it could hardly be called a battle. But such overwhelming odds could lead to negligence.

We'll just have to do something about that.

After dressing in a dark shenyi and arranging himself, Shusei left for Neison's room. Neison was already awake and writing at his desk.

"Grandfather, I'm leaving to hear His Majesty's decision. If he is unwilling to abdicate, it will mean war. I hope you understand."

"Good. Either way is fine," Neison replied with a casual and confident smile. "Come, take a look at these, Shusei. They're letters from all the bureaucrats stating they want to come pledge fealty to the Ho House. You must be getting them too, right?"

The old bureaucrat proudly motioned toward a box stuffed with letters. Like Neison had suspected, it resembled the mountain of letters Shusei had also received. Some wanted to pledge their fealty. Others offered their daughters or family heirlooms. All of them were trying to gain his favor.

The bureaucrats who had placed their names on the Letter of Compact obviously wouldn't be participating in the battle. Since they all planned on standing back and watching things unfold, they were biding their time by laying the groundwork for advancement in the aftermath of the war.

The seeds of corrupt government begin to sprout before the system even takes root.

Shusei had been watching all of their movements with cold eyes.

But none of that matters to me.

"I'll be off," Shusei said with a pristine bow. "If war breaks out, forgive me. It's what I must do as a child of the Ho House."

"Let's raise a cup when the war is over," Neison called as his grandson departed.

Shusei boarded a carriage and rode for the imperial palace. He left the carriage in the plaza. There was no sign of the tents and pots that had filled the plaza before. Now, the soldiers stood in formation with arms ready.

The chief general, clad in armor, came to greet Shusei, along with the Minister of Justice, who wore a cloak atop his usual garb.

"It's finally time, Lord Ho," the general said as he bowed. His hairy face was curled in a grin. The man had been irritated over being stuck in the plaza for the last ten days, but now that his hour had come, he was full of vigor.

The minister, on the other hand, was characteristically nervous.

"How has the palace seemed?" Shusei asked.

"Nothing's changed. The gates are shut tight, and everything's been quiet," the minister responded.

Shusei nodded.

"Well then, shall we go?" he asked, taking a languid step forward.

The trio passed through the center of the arranged soldiers. The soldiers were told to form up at dawn as a show of force. The men at the vanguard carried yellow banners emblazoned with the Ho House's symbol.

They approached the immense main gate blocking the way to the palace and looked up. The massive stone doors were engraved with a soaring dragon. It glared down at Shusei with its stone eyes. The gate doors were so enormous, they took a hundred men to open each side. The main gates were rarely ever opened. Instead, the smaller gates to the left and right were usually used. These smaller iron doors were similarly closed.

On a watchtower above the gate, a pair of guards stood watching their approach.

“Ho Shusei, lord of the Ho House, has arrived! Open the gates!” the chief general roared.

As he spoke, a third figure appeared on the watchtower. Shusei squinted to try and make out the figure against the sun.

Standing boldly atop the gate and wreathed in sunlight was Ryu Shohi, fifth emperor of Konkoku. He wore a purple robe so dark it was nearly black, embroidered with a dragon in silver thread. The shining red beads of his necklace and the swaying jewels hanging from his crown exuded the dignity of the throne.

Shu Kojin, Ryo Renka, and Jin Keiyu appeared from behind their emperor.

“Ho Shusei, lord of the Ho House, has shown his visage. Please, open the gate. He has come to see His Majesty, as promised,” the Minister of Justice shouted.

Kojin stepped forward to stand beside the emperor.

“We can have the meeting here. What is it you’ve come for, Lord Ho?” the chancellor called down.

“Don’t play dumb. And you think you can hold a meeting looking down from a watchtower? Just how little do you think of us?” the general barked.

“Now now. This is fine. We’re simply here to ask the questions we need to ask and do what we need to do,” Shusei said with a wan smile, attempting to appease the general. He turned his gaze to look directly at Shohi and raised his voice. “Have you come to a decision, Your Majesty? What is your answer?”

“My answer?” Shohi smirked. He then reached behind him and seemed to

grasp something.

Everyone below strained their eyes to get a better look. It was a bow with an arrow already nocked. The emperor aimed it directly at Shusei.

“Watch out!” the Minister of Justice cried. Just as he did, Shohi loosed the arrow.

The wind whistled as the arrow split the air. Shusei jumped away, and the arrow buried itself between the cobblestones by his feet.

“There’s my answer, Shusei.”

With that as their signal, soldiers appeared on the walls flanking the gate, all with bows at the ready. They’d likely been lying in wait there. All of their bows were aimed at the trio standing before the gate.

Damn!

The nearby soldiers rushed forward with shields raised to protect Shusei.

“Wait! You can’t go there!”

Suddenly, a girl’s cry rang out. Realizing who it belonged to, Shusei’s eyes went wide.

Rimi?! Why are you here?!

Atop the watchtower, Shohi seemed similarly surprised.

II

Tama was racing toward the main gate. When Rimi realized that was the dragon’s destination, she grew panicked.

Jotetsu had told her that Shohi planned to refuse entry to Shusei and drive him away with a declaration of war. There was no doubt that the two were likely facing each other at that very moment.

As she neared the gate, she saw a huge number of soldiers and guards gathered. They were all standing at the ready, clad in chain mail and bearing spears. She could see guards lining the palace walls, crouching down and armed with bows.

Tama darted between the soldiers. Rimi chased after her, shouting apologies as she pushed her way through the guards. The assembled troops, apparently shocked by the sudden appearance of a palace girl and hoping to get out of her path, parted to let her by.

The little dragon raced to the stairs leading up the palace walls and bounded up them. Rimi chased after her, but as she went to climb the stairs, she heard someone call out to her.

“Lady Rimi?! What are you doing here?!”

It was Kyo Kunki. He looked panicked as he raced toward the consort, but she couldn’t afford to stop now.

“There’s something wrong with Tama!” Rimi cried, offering only a brief look back as she ran up the stairs.

“Tama?! The mouse?! Whatever the case, you can’t be here! Go back! You can’t go up on the walls!”

“I have to go after her!”

Without a second look back, Rimi raced up the stairs. Tama had already reached the top of the walls. Rimi was only a few steps behind her, but she’d been running so long that she could barely breathe. It felt like her chest was going to burst.

Tama was charging straight for the watchtower. Kojin and the others were there, and she could see Shohi standing ahead with a bow in his hand. He loosed an arrow, leaving the bowstring vibrating.

“Wait! You can’t go there!”

At the sound of the consort’s voice, Shohi turned around. Kojin and the ministers did the same.

“Rimi?” Shohi said, stunned to find Rimi racing straight for him.

“Your Majesty! Look!” Kojin snapped. He was pointing at Tama. As the emperor realized the dragon was there, the color ran from his face.

Jotetsu, who’d been standing off to the side, scrambled to catch Tama. However, Tama dodged his grasp and climbed up to the handrail. In a panic,

Shohi ran to the handrail with arms outstretched.

Suddenly, Tama raised her head and gazed up at the sky.

She's going to fly away!

The realization dawned on Rimi. Tama was trying to fly.

"Tama, where are you going?! Are you leaving us?!" Rimi cried.

The little dragon turned back, shook her head slightly, and stared at Rimi with her big blue eyes.

"Wait!" Shohi shouted. He lunged for Tama, but she evaded his grasp and kicked off of the handrail.

In a burst of brilliant white light, and with silvery fur waving in the air, the dragon danced up into the sky.

Just as she did, a powerful wind swept across the palace walls. In the plaza below, spiraling pillars of wind erupted. The soldiers down there shouted in panicked voices, while the men on the walls were thrown into chaos.

Rimi raced to the handrail and climbed onto it with arms outstretched.

"Tama!"

But the consort's voice was lost in the wind as it tore at her long hair and sleeves.

"Rimi, stop!" Shohi shouted.

"But Your Majesty!"

Shohi grabbed Rimi and held her in place. She stared up into the sky, looking for Tama.

The dragon, who had been swirling upward, suddenly began to fall straight down. But right as she came in front of Shusei, she seemed to bound off an invisible step and soar straight back up.

Shusei stood in a daze, buffeted by the winds as he gazed up at Tama.

The dragon climbed higher and higher. She grew smaller until she was just a silver speck. Then, she was gone.



As Tama disappeared, so too did the wind.

“Your Majesty... Tama, she...” Rimi said, collapsing into Shohi’s chest.

The emperor just held her close as he stared at a single point in the sky.

“Why? *Why?*” he asked, biting his lip in frustration.

Kojin and Jotetsu were similarly dumbfounded. Renka and Keiyu didn’t know that Tama was the Quinary Dragon, but from their wide eyes, they could surely tell she wasn’t just some ordinary animal.

“Was that the Quinary Dragon?!” called a throaty voice from below.

Rimi looked over the handrail. Beside Shusei, the chief general was gazing upward, awestruck.

“Did you see that creature, men?! It might have been small, but from the way it flew, there’s no doubt it was a dragon!” the general shouted. “That was the Quinary Dragon, which gives the emperor the power to rule Konkoku! As the emperor shot at Lord Ho, the dragon left him! He no longer has Heaven’s favor! Heaven stands with us!”

The soldiers responded with a resounding roar.

As Shusei gazed in wonder at the sky, the chief general turned to him.

“Do we attack, Lord Ho?” he asked.

The scholar looked up at the watchtower, apparently stunned. With gritted teeth, Shohi stared at him. Shusei stared straight back as he slowly raised a hand.

“Attack,” he ordered.

The chief general thrust his spear into the sky and howled. His soldiers replied with a battle cry. From behind them, gongs and war drums began to bellow.

“Men! Hear me, and do not lose heart!” Shohi called to the soldiers on the walls around him. “That was no dragon! It was a sign that all bad fortune has fled the palace! Heaven stands with me!”

In response, the soldiers on the walls raised their voices.

“Loose your arrows! Don’t let a single man scale the walls!” Kojin ordered. At his word, every one of the soldiers began shooting.

“Lady Rimi!” Kyo Kunki cried. He’d made it to the top of the wall and raced over to her.

“Kunki, take Rimi to the rear palace,” Shohi ordered, pushing the consort toward Kunki.

“Understood. Let’s go, Lady Rimi.”

“But Your Majesty!”

Rimi was distraught and didn’t want to leave Shohi. She wanted to take responsibility for letting Tama get away, but she didn’t know how.

Shohi turned toward her and offered a smile.

“Just go to the rear palace and wait,” he said.

Rimi knew she’d just be in the way here. She had no grounds to insist on staying. Out of frustration, anguish, and shame, the consort began to cry. She leaned against Kunki as he led her down the stairs and back to the rear palace.

Why, Tama?

Between the shock and the chaos, Rimi could barely think. All that surfaced in her mind were doubts.

Could Tama have abandoned His Majesty?

That idea terrified her more than anything. If Tama was the bearer of Heaven’s will and she had left Shohi, his future was hopeless. Shohi likely realized that too. In spite of that, he’d encouraged his men to fight without letting a hint of doubt show.

Rimi believed in Shohi. She believed he would be a great emperor.

So why had Tama abandoned him?

Upon reaching the main gate of the rear palace, Kunki handed Rimi off to Hakurei. He gave the eunuch a brief explanation of what had transpired before returning to the gate so he could fight.

Hakurei wrapped an arm around Rimi, who couldn’t stop crying, and led her

away.

“So the Quinary Dragon flew away?” he asked.

Rimi tearfully nodded.

“I couldn’t stop her,” the consort said between sobs. “I’d noticed she was acting strange... If only I’d asked her to get into that silver cage. Maybe none of this would’ve happened...”

“No, the Quinary Dragon enjoys its freedom. It wouldn’t want to be in a cage,” Hakurei said, gently shaking his head. “Perhaps you could’ve forced it, but then you only would have angered the dragon. And we could hardly expect its protection after angering it. We’d be in the same situation.”

Even in the rear palace, they could hear the sounds of battle breaking out at the southern gate. It was distant, but the chorus of countless people shouting was unmistakable. It stirred unease in Rimi. Handmaids were huddled together, seemingly unwilling to leave the rear palace’s gate as they listened uneasily to the distant roar of voices.

Hakurei led Rimi to the Palace of Northern Peaks where the four consorts continued to work through the piles of books despite the clear worry etched on their faces. They were probably trying to act as if everything was normal and remain calm, even while the clashing sounds of battle rang in their ears.

The four seemed distraught to see Rimi in tears and immediately led her to the sofa where they asked if something had happened. The future empress was unable to explain things between her sobs, so Hakurei explained in her stead.

The four consorts appeared to lose heart when they heard Tama had been lost. It was a natural reaction. With Tama gone, Shohi’s future was in doubt.

So sat beside Rimi and held her hand, but as the Noble Consort’s worries grew, her grip became crushing. On stood with her head hanging down, and Ho collapsed into a nearby seat. Yo placed her hands on the back of the sofa and gazed at Rimi as she cried.

“Don’t cry, my dearest. Maybe the Quinary Dragon didn’t leave for good? It could’ve just...gone out for a bit?” the Pure Consort suggested.

“Just off on a little jaunt? Is that it?” Ho asked with a weak smile.

But So stared at Rimi with a confident gaze.

“Your mouse...sorry, the Quinary Dragon was quite attached to you, wasn’t it? It was. And now it’s just run off and abandoned you? I think that’s strange, don’t you?” she asked.

That caused On to raise her head, as if it reminded her of something.

“I was just reading in *Legends of the Quinary Dragon in Verse* that human emotions can be exhausting for the Quinary Dragon. The book said it should be placed in its silver cage to protect it,” On explained. Rimi recalled that Shusei had found the same thing. “It also mentioned that, should the Quinary Dragon be unable to endure people’s emotions, it will be forced to act. In other words, it will find a way to protect itself. With the chaos of battle making things even worse, maybe it couldn’t stay in the palace any longer?”

“What’s your point?” Ho asked offhandedly.

“I believe the Quinary Dragon may not have abandoned His Majesty. It simply hates conflict and had to flee for a while. Lady Setsu, did the Quinary Dragon show any reluctance to go?”

The question made Rimi raise her tear-stained face. She tried to think back, but all she could remember was Tama suddenly running off. Rimi had chased desperately after her, but Tama had completely ignored her pleas. The dragon had sprinted to the walls and bounded up to the railing. She’d stretched her neck, gazed at the sky, and tried to fly away. And through it all, Rimi had kept calling to her.

“...Wait...”

The memory continued playing out in Rimi’s mind. She’d cried out to Tama, and their eyes met. She clearly remembered catching the dragon’s blue eyes. And sure enough, she did feel like Tama had slightly shaken her head. What was it Rimi had said?

“Just before Tama flew away, I called out to her. She turned back for a second, and I think she kind of shook her head,” Rimi recalled.

“What did you say to her?” So asked, leaning forward.

“I think I asked if she was leaving us?”

“What do you think that means?” Yo asked, puzzled. The four consorts exchanged looks.

“I suppose it was saying you’ll meet again,” Hakurei, who was standing off to the side, suggested. “Rimi asked if the Quinary Dragon was leaving, and it shook its head. I’d guess that’s what it meant.”

“You mean she’s going to come back to the palace?” Rimi asked, turning her attention to Hakurei.

“I can’t say for certain. You may meet again, but as for the where or how? I don’t know. I believe it all ties back to why the Quinary Dragon is attached to you in the first place. What do you mean to the throne of Konkoku, exactly?”

“She likes me because I feed her.”

“Come now, Rimi. Do you honestly believe a divine dragon would become attached to someone because of that?”

“I think so!” Yo said. “When it comes to taming, nothing beats food!”

“I can’t help it if that’s how you see things, but should you really be thinking of the Quinary Dragon as some kind of pet?” Hakurei chided. “Rulers may change, countries may change, but it is what grants the power to rule, regardless of how it looks. The Quinary Dragon carries Heaven’s will with it.”

“Hakurei is right,” Ho added, standing and reaching for a nearby book. “We need to understand why the Quinary Dragon has remained with Lady Setsu until now and what it ‘decided.’ If we can figure that out, we might understand why it disappeared. Let’s get to work.”

“I agree. We can’t be certain His Majesty has lost Heaven’s favor. If we can at least understand the why of it, we can give His Majesty hope,” So said as she stood and walked over to the table cluttered with books. On nodded and returned to her seat.

Their desperation to find some answer within Heaven’s will was obvious. But their refusal to give up hope was encouraging.

I can't just sit around and cry.

Rimi wiped the tears from her cheeks. Yo pressed her cheek against Rimi's and grinned.

"You just rest, my dearest. I'll work on sorting the books," Yo said, then called to Hakurei in a pleading voice. "Hakureiiii! Why don't you help us research? Fill in for me. I bet you can find all sorts of things."

"That's a good idea. Could we bother you with that?" So asked, raising her head.

"I agree!" On added.

But Hakurei shook his head.

"As deeply as I'd like to do that, I must attend to my other duties," the eunuch said.

"What's more important than this?" On asked somewhat reproachfully. Perhaps the worry was getting to her.

"Hakurei has a lot to do. We can handle it," Ho said.

The four consorts doggedly continued their research amid the endless sounds of battle. Dazedly, Rimi watched them work and bit her lip.

I have to do something too. Is there anything I can do?

She couldn't read any of the books. She didn't have the strength to join in the battle. So what could she do to help? The only thing she was confident in was her cooking.

Shohi's smile when he'd said her cooking was delicious suddenly came to mind.

Of course! Food!

Rimi had heard this would be a siege. All of the soldiers' food was probably being planned and controlled by the Chief of Dining and his crew.

But the rear palace had minor food stores as well. Now that they had no idea when the reinforcements might arrive, it was important to calculate how many people the rear palace's stocks could feed and for how long.

With that in mind, she wondered if there was a way to serve limited food creatively. If it was going to be for soldiers, it would need to be something satisfying, even in small amounts. The women of Food Service were probably working hard to figure out just that.

“Pardon me, four consorts. I’m going to Food Service,” Rimi announced, to the four consorts’ confusion, as she stood up. “I imagine the women there are very busy. I think I could be useful.”

“The empress-to-be working in Food Service?” Hakurei asked with a dismayed look.

“If there’s something I can do to help, then I want to do it!” Rimi insisted.

So seemed aghast at the idea, but she gave a defeated smile.

“Yes, I suppose that might be best. While you’re at it, could you take Yo? It’ll keep her from scampering around here. Maybe they can have her count sacks of wheat,” the Noble Consort suggested.

“That would be great!” Yo exclaimed, clapping her hands together. “I’ll happily take bags of wheat over dusty old books!”

“Well, that’s that, I suppose,” Hakurei said with a pained smile.

Rimi led Yo to the Food Service building.

III

There are so many of them. We knock down one after another, but they keep coming.

Fear and panic bubbled within Shohi as he watched the battle from the tower.

Enemy soldiers fell from the wall with arrows in their faces. Guards atop the walls shot their bows like men possessed. Above the wall and below it, the air was filled with wild, chaotic shouting.

Under Shusei’s order, the chief general’s thousand soldiers had all immediately begun scaling the walls. They had readied tall ladders, which they’d placed against the palace walls. The guards on the wall shot them off the

ladders, but every fallen enemy was replaced by another.

There were so many ladders as well. When the guards weren't vigilant, enemies would sometimes reach the top of the wall. When the nearby guards drew their swords and took care of one of the enemies who breached the wall, their fallen opponent would be replaced by two or three more, and it would turn into a melee. The more experienced swordsmen, like Kunki and Jotetsu, would then dive in and put an end to the situation.

The problem was that the soldiers were getting tired. Their tiny force had to shoot down an overpowering stream of enemies. There was never a moment to rest.

Traditional wisdom said an attacker needed three times the soldiers to overtake a defensive position. But the enemy had thirty thousand men at their disposal. That was far more than three times. They weren't just facing the one thousand troops positioned outside of the gate. More and more men would keep flooding in from the city, meaning every man they lost would be replaced by a fresh one. The enemy was practically invincible.

"The west!" came a far-off wail, which was getting closer. "Enemies are gathering at the western walls! We need archers!"

"They're coming from the east too!" came another urgent voice. "We need men!"

"Send three units of archers to the eastern and western walls immediately! And two units of soldiers with swords to each side as well!" Kojin ordered from beside Shohi. "Keiyu, take the east. Renka, go west. Figure out the situation and give orders."

Keiyu and Renka, who had been nearby on the watchtower calling out orders, acknowledged Kojin's command and headed to the east and west gates.

The Ministers of Rites and Personnel were scholars, so commanding a battlefield was probably difficult for them. They didn't have any experience or training after all. Unfortunately, there was an overwhelming shortage of people who could command the troops, so all the emperor's forces could do was rely on the ministers and their good judgment. It wasn't a situation where one could distinguish between scholars and commanders.

Shohi bit his lip and turned his gaze to the distant outskirts of Annei. Ho troops poured from outlying fortresses into the city. They looked like a swarm of ants coming to crush a defenseless cricket.

And no sign of the prefectural armies.

Regret filled Shohi. Perhaps all of this was a reckless mistake.

The Quinary Dragon has left me too.

The despair of that moment, seeing the dragon leap into the sky, made the emperor want to wail. Perhaps Heaven had abandoned him.

But I made my decision to remain as emperor and not hand over the throne. And I still have people who believe in me.

Out of the corner of his eye, Shohi could see the men fighting. Soldiers with teeth clenched as they loosed arrows. Kunki with shoulders heaving and a bloodied sword in hand.

What would Shohi be giving those men but despair if he broke down crying because Heaven had abandoned him? That was why he'd desperately claimed the Quinary Dragon's departure was a good omen. It let him encourage the men.

If they could just hold out until reinforcements arrived, victory was still possible. However, the Quinary Dragon's disappearance had almost seemed to shatter and mock that hope.

Well, what of it?! Who cares!

For centuries, rulers of the continent had venerated the Quinary Dragon and worked desperately to keep it close. But it was hard to see the cute little pet that happily ate Rimi's cooking as the supreme being that granted the power to rule the continent.

Even if I can't rely on the dragon, I can rely on the vassals who support me. Damn the dragon! I'll just believe in the people who believe in me!

An angry refusal to be defeated boiled in Shohi's breast.

As the sun climbed to its zenith, the bowmen's movements had grown dull. They were clearly exhausted. On all sides, more and more enemies were

reaching the top of the wall. The ensuing melees only served to wear the men out more.

Again, an enemy crested one of the southern gate's corners, and guards surged to drive him back. A lone soldier wearing a breastplate and carrying a bloodied sword broke through the melee and charged for the watchtower where Shohi was standing.

Shohi moved to draw his sword, but before he could, Kojin jumped out in front of him to protect his emperor.

"Kojin!" Shohi shouted.

The soldier had a crazed look in his eye that made him seem more beast than man. But Shohi's attention was torn from the soldier's glare when he heard the man suddenly cry out in pain and fall back down the stone steps. Jotetsu had cut the soldier down from behind.

"Your Majesty! It's getting too dangerous! Please, fall back from the walls!" the spy shouted. His cheeks were splattered with the fallen man's blood.

"Find somewhere safe," Kojin agreed. "I'll issue orders here."

"I can't do that," Shohi said, firmly shaking his head. "If I leave the walls, these exhausted men will lose heart. They'll think it's only a matter of time before the walls fall if I'm retreating."

"That's all well and good, but if something happens to you here, it's all over!" Jotetsu said, charging impatiently toward the emperor.

But Shohi drew his sword and met Jotetsu's approach with a glare.

"Step back. I know you, Jotetsu. You want to drag me off these walls, even if it means knocking me out, am I right?" Shohi asked.

The spy's expression was the only answer he needed.

"You want to make sure nothing happens to me? Then protect me," Shohi ordered fiercely.

"But—"

"I'm staying here until the walls are about to fall. If you're with me, I believe I

can still make it out when that happens. Don't let me down."

Kojin looked at the two men.

"Jotetsu, can you do that?" the chancellor asked, seemingly resolved. He was likely worried about how the emperor's departure would demoralize the troops. It seemed he was willing to brave the danger if Shohi's own resolve wasn't wavering.

"Tch. The emperor and the chancellor, both talking like madmen," Jotetsu spat. He turned away and raised his sword. "Fine. I'll do what I can."

"I'm counting on you," Shohi said with a grin.

Kunki, followed by five soldiers with torches, came charging by the watchtower. When Shohi looked down at them, he could see oil pots were being assembled at the edge of the wall. Renka was nearby, ordering the placement of the pots. The minister looked over and gave a big wave, then relayed some sort of signal with her fingers. Kojin nodded.

"Are we using the fire?" Shohi asked.

"We'd hoped to hold off on it until sunset, but we can't afford to be greedy right now."

"Do it."

Kojin raised a hand.

Ever since Shohi had made the decision to fight, soldiers had begun secretly stocking firewood around the walls. At Kojin's signal, the oil pots were poured. One after another, soldiers began using torches to ignite the wood.

As the flames erupted, soldiers cresting the wall began to panic and flail, bringing them and their ladders crashing down to the plaza below. The cascade of men and ladders landed on the soldiers crowding below the walls.

All around the palace walls, flames began springing up. It became a single barrier of flame. The wave of heat felt like a punch to the face as it blasted past Shohi.

At least the men will be able to rest their arms for a bit. But we'll probably burn through all of the wood by around sunset.

The enemy recklessly continued their assault despite the flames. As they reached the top of the wall and were stymied by the blaze, the guards shot them off their ladders. Even so, they continued to scale the walls in hopes of finding some gap in the fire.

Who knows what will happen when the flames die.

Shohi chewed his lip at the thought. The soldiers would have to go back to fighting at full strength, but would they still have the stamina to do so?

The enemy's numbers were overwhelming. One after another, fresh men appeared to fight.

The sun began to fall. Beyond the wall of flames, one could see the streets of Annei turn orange in the evening light. As Shohi continued watching, that orange color slowly bled away. The dark of night spread out from the distant mountains.

With time, the defensive flames had begun to weaken. Once more, enemy soldiers were finding their way onto the walls, and the guards fighting them back were slower than ever.

"Your Majesty, you need to take shelter," Jotetsu said as he observed the situation.

"I'm not leaving yet."

"We're out of time!" Jotetsu shouted with eyebrows raised. "I'm done with this. You're coming with me."

Just as the spy took a step toward Shohi, the distant sound of drums cut through the air. The soft rumbling made Shohi, Jotetsu, and Kojin all exchange looks.

"What is that?" Kojin gasped.

The sound was coming from the north. It resonated from both sides of Mount Bi.

It was a song meant to ready soldiers for battle.



Rimi was in the Food Service storeroom with Yo counting wheat when she

suddenly felt the rumble of war drums. The sound caused her to drop the ink brush she was using to record. Yo cried out and clung to Rimi.

The drums were close. They must have been just to the north of the imperial palace.

“What do you think that is, my dearest?”

“I don’t know. But the song they’re playing is used to stir up morale for battle.”

The consorts went pale and traded looks.

“D-Dearest, it sounds like it’s coming from the north. And it’s close. You don’t think the enemy could be...”

“Let’s go see! Come on, Yo!” Rimi said, grabbing the other consort’s hand and racing out of the storeroom. The palace women they passed all seemed frozen in fear at the sound of war drums.

Rimi led Yo to a tower that resided in the middle of a garden on the Palace of Northern Peaks’s eastern side. The tower was presumably intended for enjoying the garden from above, but it also provided a view of the imperial palace’s northern side.

The sun had begun to set at some point while they’d been working. The autumnal garden, full of chrysanthemums and clover, was now bathed in the waning light of sunset.

The pair raced up the tower’s cramped stairwell. After reaching the circular third floor, they charged to the handrail and threw themselves against it.

Mount Bi towered to the north. In the setting sun, it was cast half in light and half in shadow.

The drums seemed to be coming from the west of the mountain. A body of soldiers was circling the mountain with war banners raised. They marched in formation in double time and were heading directly for the imperial palace’s northern gate.

“It’s an army!” Yo cried. She clung to Rimi and shivered.

All of Shohi’s men were gathered on the southern, eastern, and western

fronts. The north was defenseless. Only a token force had been left there. Kojin had believed that a northern assault would be dangerous for the enemy as they'd be at risk of being attacked from behind and would have to split their forces.

They had still wanted to prepare for the possibility of the enemy attacking from the north, but the overwhelming lack of troops made that impossible.

In the bloodred light of evening, the troops charging at the palace looked like a rampant wave of wildfire. As Rimi watched the storm of dust approaching, her mind went blank.

It's hopeless.

The army was led by a number of mounted troops. The cavalry was followed by soldiers carrying war banners, but there were five different flags. Red, blue, white, green, and black. A question suddenly cut through the fog of despair.

Why are there five?

If they were Ho troops, they should have been carrying one color representing the Ho House. Looking more closely, she could make out the names emblazoned on the flags.

An. Tei. Ju. Bun. Kyo.

Rimi's hands shot to her mouth. Tears of joy welled in her eyes.

"It's the prefectural armies!" Rimi cried. Yo's eyes widened.

One of the mounted troops neared the northern gate.

"I am Minister of Revenue, To Rihan! Open the gates! The prefectural armies are here!" he roared.

The guards opened the gate. The prefectural soldiers, bathed in red light, surged into the palace. They followed the horsemen around the rear palace and to the south. They were clearly headed straight to the defense of the steadily embattled walls.

Yo leaned over the railing and squealed with happiness.

"My dearest, they're here! The prefectural armies!"

Chapter 6: Mars Rises

I

Unsure of what was happening, Shohi warily looked to the north. He was met by the sight of soldiers charging through the palace interior toward the walls like a wave filling every street and alley. They were led by cavalry, and one of the mounted men had a familiar face.

Shohi gasped.

“Rihan!” Kojin shouted with likely unintentional glee.

The Minister of Revenue headed straight for the walls, dismounted, and charged up the stairs. A unit of soldiers accompanied him. The soldiers seemed to have already anticipated the situation, as they immediately took positions on the walls and began unleashing arrows at enemies.

Rihan charged up the watchtower and immediately kneeled before Shohi.

“Forgive my late arrival, Your Majesty. The prefectural armies have come,” Rihan reported. When he raised his head, Shohi could see the minister’s face was unshaven, his topknot was a mess, and his cloak was completely white with dust.

“How many men?!” Kojin frantically demanded.

“The prefectural armies have mobilized forty-three thousand men,” Rihan explained. “However, the troops that have arrived today are an advance force of thirty thousand from the prefectures of An, Tei, Ju, Bun, and Kyo. The main body of troops from Bun and Kyo are coming from farther away and will take some time. But I promise you, they will come.”

Renka and Keiyu, who had been commanding the eastern and western walls, arrived at the tower almost simultaneously. Both seemed shocked and confused by the sudden appearance of prefectural soldiers, but the prefectural commanders had apparently been well briefed and immediately relieved the

tired soldiers. Both had decided to leave the orders to said commanders and come to the tower to find out what was happening.

Upon seeing Rihan's face, both ministers slumped in relief.

"What are the prefectural armies doing here?" Keiyu asked, seemingly dumbfounded. "There would've been reports if this many soldiers were on the move, but we heard nothing! How did you get this many people here, Rihan?"

Rihan, bearded and filthy, broke into a grin. It made the old scar beneath his right eye twist. Between that and his appearance, he seemed more like a bandit chief than a minister.

"I took some advice from Kan Cho'un," Rihan said.

"And what did the Hero of the Countryside have to say?" Renka asked, apparently amused.

"He said we should expect the enemy to assume His Majesty would call for reinforcements from the prefectures. He suggested we march through the mountains since there would probably be people watching the roads. But it took longer than expected, which is why we're late."

"Even so, mobilizing tens of thousands of troops?" Keiyu asked. But Rihan shook his head.

"Another idea from Kan Cho'un," Rihan explained. "We had the men move in small formations as far as they could. He had us split into dozens of units and take different roads through the mountains. Everyone was free to move however they felt best. The only thing we decided on was the day, time, and place where we'd regroup. Today was that day. It took most of the day to regroup, though. It was evening before we finished."

Shohi was happy, but the relief was far greater. The enemy had thirty thousand troops. Now, so did he. As defenders, an even fight would be simple, and another thirteen thousand troops were still on the way.

I think...we can win.

As long as the Ho House didn't have any more men, Shohi would likely win.

The spirit atop the walls was even more energetic than when battle had first

broken out. Enemy soldiers fell one after another, and their ladders began going with them. The sudden arrival of reinforcements had thrown the enemy army into chaos.

At the far end of the plaza, a gong rang loudly. The first strike was followed by eight more quick strikes. The signal to retreat. The guards and prefectural soldiers along the wall, realizing what the signal was, raised their fists in the air and howled.

The sun had fallen behind the mountains, and dusk had already taken hold. Before long, it would be completely dark. The enemy wouldn't be able to see well enough to attack from below. The arrival of reinforcements had perfectly coincided with the loss of light, which the enemy had apparently taken as a sign they should just retreat.

It was possible they had some nighttime plots, and the fighting would quickly resume in the morning. But for now, the palace could finally breathe.

As Shohi listened to the joyous cheers of guards and prefectural soldiers, he felt an enormous weight lift from his shoulders. Maybe it was the sudden relief that made his vision waver.

“You’ve done...very well, Rihan. You have...my gratitude...”

That was all Shohi could get out before he felt the blood rush from his head.

Uh-oh was the last thought he had before losing consciousness.



Upon realizing the prefectural soldiers had come to reinforce the castle, Rimi and Yo hurried back to the Palace of Northern Peaks to let the other consorts know. Everyone began joyfully hugging each other.

While news of the prefectural armies' arrival swept through the palace, the light continued to fade. Eventually, the enemy's war cries faded as well.

While everyone was enjoying a moment of relief, Hakurei appeared to seek the approval of the four consorts on a matter. With a grave expression, he explained that Chancellor Shu Kojin had requested part of the rear palace be opened to house bureaucrats and prefectural soldiers. Given that they were in a siege situation, and with so many men arriving at once, there was nowhere but

the rear palace to house them. The four consorts approved the request.

While Hakurei explained matters, a carriage arrived at the Palace of Northern Peaks carrying an unconscious Shohi. Jotetsu carried the emperor to a hastily prepared bedroom. A doctor being led by a eunuch was right behind them.

Rimi and the four consorts went pale, but all they could do was watch the emperor's closed bedroom door from the walkway.

The room where Shohi had been brought was the largest and most prestigious in the Palace of Northern Peaks. It was a fine room with good ventilation, an antechamber, and a view of the palace's central garden. If one opened the peony-engraved door, they'd have a splendid view of the carefully arranged rocks and trees. Purple bellflowers, in full bloom, swayed throughout the garden.

But the door remained shut. Only the glow of candlelight was visible from beneath the door. Occasionally, they could make out the shadow of someone moving on the other side.

"Did something happen to His Majesty?" On asked tearfully.

Shohi hadn't seemed injured. His sudden collapse could only be explained by the ailment he'd been suffering from. He'd gone into a stressful battle with a mysterious ailment. It wasn't very surprising that his condition had suddenly worsened.

To protect morale, the emperor's condition had been kept secret from everyone, even the four consorts. But now that he'd collapsed, it would be difficult for it to remain a secret.

"His Majesty started to feel unwell about five days ago. He said his vision was blurry, and he couldn't see well. He lost feeling in his fingers too. But he was clear that we weren't to tell anyone about it," Rimi explained.

"You can't be serious! What's causing it?" So asked with wide, shocked eyes.

"We don't know. The doctor was just as confused as us."

"And...that's why he's collapsed? I don't want to believe it..." Yo said with a trembling voice. Even the normally cheerful Pure Consort was frightened.

“I thought it was strange that His Majesty suddenly started thinking about producing an heir right before battle. So that’s why...” So said, nodding gravely. “Ho, you’ve been spending time with him. Have you noticed anything strange about His Majesty?”

“Our time together isn’t that long, and it’s always been at night. I hadn’t noticed anything,” Ho answered.

Suddenly, the door opened. Rimi and the consorts all turned to see what was happening. The doctor, accompanied by Shu Kojin, stepped out of the room. He and the chancellor discussed something before the doctor bowed and departed.

“Chancellor Shu! How is His Majesty?!” On asked. She was apparently unable to bear it any longer and had jumped straight to the point.

Kojin, his expression pained, seemed to only become aware of the four consorts at that moment. He bowed and approached.

“Hello, four consorts. It’s been some time,” Kojin said.

“Enough of that! How is His Majesty?!” So snapped. The chancellor’s greeting was polite enough, but apparently, the Noble Consort had no time for it.

“He hasn’t opened his eyes yet. He...appears to be in a coma,” Kojin said. The chancellor was calm and placid as he reported the news, perhaps intentionally so.

Rimi reeled from the shock.

A coma? It can’t be!

Yo seemed like she was about to collapse, so Rimi hurriedly grabbed the Pure Consort and held her close. The other consorts all looked pale.

Just then, Jotetsu and Hakurei came out of the room. Hakurei was the first to notice the consorts’ presence and came to offer a bow. Jotetsu split away from the eunuch to speak with Kojin.

“Hakurei said he’s going to handle His Majesty’s nursing,” Jotetsu whispered.

The chancellor frowned.

“Hakurei, you plan on handling His Majesty’s care?” Kojin asked, turning to the director.

“Indeed. I am a eunuch in his service, after all. Should I not?”

“If he needs to be cared for, we should do it! We’re his consorts, after all!” On said.

Hakurei turned and gazed kindly at the four consorts with his amber eyes.

“No, I’m afraid not. Caring for an unconscious patient requires physical strength. Do you think you can support an unconscious man’s heavy body?”

“If we had a little help, we could!” So said, but Hakurei shook his head.

“If he begins to choke or if he falls, you won’t have time to call for help. A nurse needs to be able to deal with such things.”

Of course he was right, but Rimi understood how the four consorts felt. Still, they were too rational to rely on emotional arguments, so they swallowed their complaints. Yo tried to support herself on shaking legs while Rimi assisted her.

“I understand we can’t help with his care, but can’t we at least see how he’s doing?” the Pure Consort asked, eyes watery with tears.

“I’m afraid I have to say no to that as well. A lot of noise isn’t going to help him right now.”

“We won’t make a lot of noise!” Yo snapped, but Hakurei would not be moved.

“The mere presence of others can create a burden on him. I’m sorry, but I must say no.”

Hakurei took a step back to stand in front of the bedroom door. He slowly looked at everyone present, from the four consorts and Rimi to Jotetsu and Kojin.

“I will attend to His Majesty. Nobody else may see him for now. Understood?”

The force of the eunuch’s proclamation surprised Rimi. Something felt off.

This is strange. Master Hakurei is being very unlike himself.

Forcibly volunteering himself into caring for his little brother could be seen as

a show of love. But refusing to let anyone else see the emperor was going too far. Jotetsu looked suspicious, and Kojin frowned.

“And please, make sure the area stays quiet,” Hakurei added. The implied message seemed to be “hurry up and go away.” The director gave a careless bow and disappeared into the bedroom.

Rimi was still reeling from the shock of learning Shohi was in a coma. This new, stubborn behavior from Hakurei just made her even more worried.

Something's off. There's definitely something off.

Just then, the memory of the black vial returned to her. Both times she'd seen it, the vial was near Hakurei's hand.

It seems impossible. But...but if...

The unease continued to swell inside Rimi, accompanied by a sense of dread.

A cold, wet wind blew while raindrops began to drop from the sky.



The prefectural armies had reinforced the palace just as the sun was setting, leading the enemy to break off their attack.

The only word for it is lucky.

A small room had been set aside in the rear palace for Kojin and the ministers. No sooner had Renka entered than she dropped on the sofa and leaned back. Keiyu and Rihan were similarly slumped forward on a table, both silent. Rihan seemed especially tired after his long journey, not even bothering to raise his head.

A cold, wet wind blew through the open doors and windows. It had begun to rain, drawing a powerful, earthy scent from the ground.

Renka was desperate for a smoke. Her mind spun while she fiddled nervously with her fingers.

The instant Shohi had declared war, the Ho House had attacked. There was nothing unusual about that, assuming they'd considered the possibility that the emperor wouldn't quietly abdicate. But the enemy's battle plan nagged at Renka. Detachments had suddenly attacked from the east and west, as if the

enemy was trying desperately to win the battle.

The Ho House had an overwhelming advantage of numbers. Did they really need to resort to such tactics? The emperor was besieged and would run out of food and arrows before long. If they had just patiently waited, the enemy could've taken the palace with minimal losses.

But they didn't do that. They tried to strike like lightning. A strategy such as that brings heavy losses, yet they did it anyway. So why not attack from the north too?

An attack from all directions would be more efficient, but they specifically avoided a northern assault.

Kojin had assumed that Shusei would decide that a northern attack would be risky since they would be attacked from the rear if Shohi received reinforcements. The city streets to the south, east, and west would make a rear assault from those directions impossible.

So why would a man who showed that sort of caution push for a costly lightning attack?

Because the reasoning behind the quick strike and the lack of a northern attack were one and the same.

They knew for a fact that we were going to fight and were awaiting reinforcements.

It was the only answer. Shusei wanted to storm the palace before their support arrived. He didn't attack from the north because he was planning for their arrival.

If it was pure anticipation, he would've had other plans in place. He couldn't have attacked with such certainty.

Which means the Ho House has an informant within the palace. I'm certain of it.

The request for aid from the prefectures and Saisakoku was a closely guarded secret.

Who could it be?

Renka was staring intensely at the ceiling when Kojin entered. He was probably back from escorting Shohi to the Palace of Northern Peaks. Upon the chancellor's return, Keiyu instantly jumped to his feet.

"Chancellor Shu! How is His Majesty?" Keiyu asked. Rihan lifted his head at the sound of his fellow minister's voice.

"He's in a coma," Kojin reported gravely.

Renka was too shocked to even muster a response. All she could think was "why now?" It was inevitable that fighting would break out again at sunrise. Morale would suffer without the emperor there to lead.

But something strange had been happening to Shohi even before the fighting began. It was too late to change things, but she still wanted to understand the situation.

"A coma? His health has gotten that bad? Can we see him?" Renka asked.

"No," Kojin answered. "Director Sai Hakurei, who's handling His Majesty's care, made it rather clear he wouldn't let anyone in."

Someone clucked their tongue.

"Why Hakurei? Who the hell gave him the right?" Rihan grumbled. In his exhaustion, he didn't even bother hiding his irritation.

"He is a eunuch in service of His Majesty, and this is the rear palace. It is what it is. I doubt we can do anything about it. Hakurei is the emperor's older brother. Still, he's in a coma. I don't see how it would make a difference if we went to see him," Kojin replied calmly as he approached the table. He looked down at the map of the palace that had been laid out. "We need to make plans for tomorrow too. What do we do now?"

Renka stood up from the couch and went to leave.

"Where are you going?" Kojin asked with a sharp sidelong glare.

"Looking for tobacco. Somebody in the rear palace has to have some. I'll be back."

"This is an emergency. You can wait."

“I know it’s an emergency. That’s exactly why I need some.”

Renka could feel Kojin’s disgusted glare on her back as she left.

It was a lie, of course. She wasn’t looking for tobacco. She was looking for the young man who served as the emperor’s escort; Shin Jotetsu was his name, as she recalled. From the way he carried himself and the vigilant look in his eyes, he seemed like some sort of spy. A competent one at that.

Renka guessed the man would be close to the emperor, so she left the palace and headed north. As she passed through the gate, she was shocked to see exactly who she was searching for. Through the obscuring rain, she could see Jotetsu walking north.

“Shin Jotetsu!” Renka called.

Jotetsu stopped and turned around. When he realized it was Renka calling him, he looked perplexed but still waited for her to catch up with him. He seemed to be trying to ward off the rain with his hand, so she walked quickly.

“What are you doing here? Aren’t you His Majesty’s bodyguard?” she asked.

“That’s exactly why I’m here. I came to ask Chancellor Shu Kojin how I ought to be protecting His Majesty,” Jotetsu replied.

“I see. By the way, I heard that Hakurei is handling His Majesty’s care?”

“That’s right.”

“Do you trust Hakurei?”

Jotetsu smirked at the pointed question.

“What do you mean by that?” he asked.

“He has Ho blood and stood to be emperor. Is it possible he wants to overturn His Majesty’s rule?”

“These days? Who knows. I can’t tell you what a fox is thinking.”

This is a waste of time. If he’s going to dodge my questions, I’ll need to cut right to the point.

“There’s a mole in the palace, and I believe they’re close to His Majesty,” Renka declared.

“Oh? And what gives you that idea?” Jotetsu asked with a cheeky smile, crossing his arms over his chest. Renka didn’t like his attitude, but she was hardly one to judge.

“The enemy fought today like they knew reinforcements were coming. If they were able to plan their attack with that much confidence, it means we have a mole.”

“Well well. You’re everything Shu Kojin said, aren’t you, Minister?” Jotetsu asked with a sharp gleam in his eye.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“We certainly do have a mole. Someone told me as much. And I believe what they said.”

“What are you saying? Do we have a mole on the enemy’s side too? Who is it?”

“Can’t say. But I believe them.”

We have our own spy among the enemy? Could he have been the one to send them? He doesn’t seem very informed about the details.

Whatever the case, it seemed her guess had been right.

“Well, we know there’s a mole then. Is there any possibility it’s Hakurei? It seems strange that he’s taken such a hard stance on managing His Majesty’s care and refusing to let anyone in. His Majesty’s in a coma. I’m worried about what might happen to him. I’d appreciate it if you’d keep an eye on His Majesty’s health,” Renka said. It was unusual for her to speak so straightforwardly.

They held eye contact for a while, and eventually, Jotetsu smirked.

“You’re definitely a friend of Kojin’s. You talk just like him,” he said.

“What?”

“Shu Kojin told me to keep a close eye on His Majesty’s room and observe Hakurei’s actions. I’ve thought he’s been acting strange for a little while now too, but what I find strange might differ a bit from you two. I do think he needs to be watched. I’m on my way there.”

“Good,” Renka sighed in relief. She raised a hand to shield herself from the rain falling on her head. “His Majesty seems like the man best suited for the throne right now. Take good care of him.”

“Looks like we’re seeing eye to eye here,” Jotetsu answered with a wolfish grin.

II

Sai Hakurei had been assigned to care for the emperor and was allowing nobody to see him. The news made Mars reflexively cluck his tongue. It might have offended the others, but they seemed as annoyed as he was, so the action passed without objection.

When he had seen Shohi crumble on the watchtower, he had felt a shiver of joy that bordered on pleasure. The emperor was taken immediately to the Palace of Northern Peaks but apparently remained unconscious. Mars hungered to see the boy emperor pale-faced and groaning his dying breaths. Unfortunately, Hakurei appeared to be turning away all visitors.

If he’s fallen into a coma, he’ll last another two days, three at the most. Even if he makes it longer, the battle will resume at sunrise tomorrow. With the emperor out of action, the troops will be demoralized and might fall under a concentrated attack. Whatever the case, His Majesty’s road ends here.

How he wanted to see the emperor’s face as he slept, unable to even see the walls closing in around him.

A face like that must be beautiful.

Just the thought of it intoxicated Mars. So many lies and deceptions, so much toil, all to see such a face. The urge was uncontrollable.

I want to see. Let me see. I want to see.

The persistent, almost childish thoughts swirled around his head.

Mars himself, an inquisitive man by nature, wondered why the desire was so intense. He supposed it gave him a perverse sense of pleasure. The sight of his young love crying and screaming was etched deep in his soul. When he saw

people cornered and hopeless like she was, it reminded him of her.

So he wanted to see it. The face of his love in their despair. There was such inexpressible joy in being reunited with one's beloved.

He wanted to see.

Mars quietly stood.



The ladies of the rear palace had been unsure of the decision to open the gates and were in an uproar when men had begun walking around, but after experiencing this emergency for a few hours, they had grown used to things. The women all worked hard to provide the men with food and water.

The falling rain hadn't gotten any worse, but it showed no signs of relenting either. Raindrops gathered on autumn leaves, swelled at their tips, and plopped to the earth below. Soldiers huddled under buildings to escape it.

Beneath every other eave, prefectural captains and their men warmed themselves around fires. The smell of burning wood suffused the rain-soaked rear palace. Quiet voices and the occasional gentle laugh filled the night. In what would usually have been impossible, the rear palace showed signs of life at night.

Even so, the northern palaces of Great Beauty, Great Light, Great Purity, and Great Heights, which were reserved for the four consorts, and the Palace of Northern Peaks, which was for the empress, remained quiet as ever.

When Hakurei had taken over Shohi's care and refused to allow anyone in to see him, he'd evidently drawn Kojin's suspicion. However, the chancellor could hardly spend all his time attending to a comatose emperor, so he'd left.

The four consorts had stayed and stared for a while at the closed door, but Consort Ho had eventually cleared everybody out.

"We're not going to change anything like this. Let's just focus on our work," she'd said. The other three, still somewhat worried, had responded with reluctant nods and returned to the reception hall.

However, the consorts had requested that Rimi stay and keep watch. The

future empress had accepted, of course. She couldn't imagine leaving unless she was specifically asked to. Whenever she thought about Hakurei's strange behavior and the black vial she'd seen, she would imagine terrible things.

I wonder if I can just have a peek at His Majesty.

With Jotetsu, Kojin, and the four consorts all gone, the area surrounding the bedroom was wrapped in silence. Until recently, the insects of fall had been chirping away, but at some point, as if intimidated by the falling rain, they'd stopped. While the showering rain hadn't grown particularly strong, it was steady.

After some time, Hakurei peeked out from the doorway.

Rimi jumped and hid in the shadow of one of the walkway's pillars.

The eunuch surveyed the area, and apparently having determined that there was nobody around, disappeared back into the room. It was such suspicious behavior that it made Rimi even more nervous.

The consort hitched up her skirt, slipped off her shoes, and stepped out onto the cool stone floor of the walkway. Step by silent step, she crept toward the room.

Unfortunately, there was no gap in the door to peek through and no open window. Unsure of what to do, she peered up and down the walkway. As she did, she noticed the door to the antechamber connecting to the bedroom. Rimi reached for the door and, blessedly, managed to open it without making any noise.

The consort slipped through the gap in the open door and found herself in a long, dark, and rather cramped room. The antechamber had no windows, but it was just bright enough to see thanks to the light slipping through from the adjoining bedroom.

Numerous decorative boards had been fitted to create a partition between the two rooms. It looked possible to remove the boards and make the antechamber and bedroom into one large space. If she got up close, Rimi thought it might be possible to peer between the boards into the bedroom. She put her eye against the gap, and sure enough, she could see the entire space.

The bedroom was bigger than she'd expected. Shohi lay on an enormous bed capable of holding three people. The bed was placed against the far wall, more than twenty paces from where Rimi was watching. She wasn't able to see Shohi from such a distance, but she could make out the shape of his body. He was utterly still.

Hakurei sat beside the bed and would lean over at times. He seemed to be checking the emperor's breathing.

Beside the bed sat a small table, atop which was the black vial.

It can't be.

As she strained her eyes to see what it was, a hand suddenly slipped over her mouth. She felt like her breath was going to stop, and she reached for the hand to try and tear it away.

"What do you think you're doing, Rimi?" came a soft whisper.

Recognizing the voice, she turned around to see Jotetsu's familiar face. He made a hand gesture signaling her to be quiet. Once she nodded, he slipped his hand away.

The spy seemed to gather Rimi's shock from her repeated blinking as he brought his lips to her ear once more.

"Shu Kojin told me to keep an eye on His Majesty's surroundings. The Minister of Personnel thinks someone close to His Majesty is a spy. And I know it for a fact since somebody told me. The intel's coming from inside the Ho House, so I'm confident it's true," he explained.

"Who in the Ho House would tell you that?"

"Someone I trust, so I believe it."

Is there a spy like Master Jotetsu in the Ho House?

Suddenly, an odd thought surfaced in Rimi's mind, and she looked up at Jotetsu.

"What?" he asked.

"N-No. It's nothing."

She banished the silly thought from her mind.

“And now that I’m here, something seems off about Hakurei. It’s been on my mind for a while. What do you think?” Jotetsu asked.

“Something’s been bothering me too,” Rimi said and pointed through the wooden slats. “The little vial on that table. I’ve seen Master Hakurei with it twice now. And he was acting strangely before too.”

Jotetsu patted the consort on the head and gave a confident “leave it to me” nod. If Hakurei tried anything, Jotetsu would probably kick down the false wall and go barreling into the next room.

I’m sure things will be fine as long as Master Jotetsu’s here, Rimi thought, trying to encourage herself.

Shohi was in a coma now, but he’d surely wake up eventually. Tama might have flown off, but Rimi still believed Heaven was on Shohi’s side. The young emperor was passionate, flexible, self-aware, and always tried to do the right thing. He’d even managed to bring back Kojin, who’d once abandoned him.

For a while, nothing happened. Shohi remained motionless, and Hakurei simply sat beside him and occasionally leaned over to check on the emperor.

With a small clatter, the bedroom door shifted. Hakurei jumped to his feet, evidently surprised by the sound as nobody had announced their entry. Rimi and Jotetsu traded looks.

The man who entered looked very strange. He wore a white shenyi like it was a cloak. He seemed to be trying to hide whatever he was wearing beneath it. His head was veiled, and his face was covered with a pure-white mask. It had cutouts for the eyes and mouth in the shape of a smile, and sinister red streaks across the cheeks. It seemed like a theater costume, but there was an ominous aura to it.

When Hakurei realized who the visitor was, his eyes glinted happily, and he gave a faint smile.

Who’s that? Master Hakurei’s acting like he knows them. And he said nobody’s allowed in, so why isn’t he scolding him?

Rimi's temples pulsed from sheer nerves. Maybe it was her bare feet, but she shivered as a chill ran through her body.

"You've put my little bottle of magic to good use, Hakurei."

The voice was muffled by the mask and was difficult to make out. All Rimi could tell was that it belonged to a man.

"Indeed, Mars. It's been wonderfully helpful. Please, take a look."

Rimi could feel Jotetsu's body tense behind her. He was prepared to instantly lunge for Shohi if anything happened. The consort continued to watch through the wall but shifted a few steps away from the spy so she wouldn't be in his way.

The masked man approached the bed. He felt around in his pocket and eventually pulled out a small black vial, which he offered to Hakurei.

"He still breathes, I assume? Perhaps I should give you some more so we can make sure it runs its course? I'm guessing you've almost run out of what I gave you before."

"Indeed," Hakurei said, taking the vial.

The masked man approached the bed. As he did, a muffled, mirthful voice slipped out of him.

"Your Majestyyyyyy..."

It was like he could barely contain his glee.

"I'm here because I wanted to see that face of yours, Your Majesty," the man whispered, stooping over the bed. It sounded like he was trying to cajole a cat.

Hakurei took a few steps back.

"Let me see your face," the man cooed.

He pulled back his veil, seemingly to get a better look at Shohi's face.

Just then, a hand shot out from beneath the covers and gripped the masked man's arm. As he tried to pull away in shock, a clear, strong voice rang out.

"You wanted to see my face, didn't you?"

The masked man tried to pull back, but the hand had a tight grip on his wrist.

Rimi gasped, and Jotetsu's eyes widened.

Could it be?

Shohi pulled back his blanket and sat up from the bed. There was no weakness in his grip as he held the man's wrist, and there was a clear shine in his eyes.

Your Majesty!

Rimi's heart burned as shock and elation coursed through her.

Your Majesty! Your Majesty!

She wanted to scream with everything she had, but the surprise and joy were so great, she couldn't make a sound. All she could do was hold her hands to her mouth and tremble.

Shohi had no crown and wore a simple robe like a sickly patient, but as he sat with the masked man's wrist in his grip, he showed not a hint of infirmity. In his other hand, he gripped a sheathed sword. He'd apparently had it in bed with him.

"Go on. Look all you like. What do you think?" the emperor asked.

At that, the masked man made a wide swing with his free hand, trying to strike Shohi. Hakurei lunged at him from behind.

Jotetsu, recovering from his shock, kicked down the wall and burst into the room.

The masked man struck Hakurei with a quick elbow, making the eunuch fall back against the wall with a grunt.

Shohi released the man's wrist and grabbed the handle of his sword. The man ran for the exit, but Jotetsu was there to bar his way, tackling him in the midsection and bringing both of them crashing to the ground. The emperor leaped out of bed after them.

Jotetsu and the stranger wrestled and rolled on the ground, trying to fight for the advantage. Jotetsu managed to land a firm kick on his opponent's stomach,

causing the man to groan and double over. Jotetsu seized that opening and straddled the man's chest, then pinned his wrists to the ground.

Amid the struggle, the intruder's veil slipped away, and the shenyi he wore over his clothes fell to the ground.

Rimi recognized his attire.

But that's...

She was astonished at the realization. It didn't seem possible.

"Your Majesty, take off his mask! Show us who Mars really is!" Hakurei shouted in a rough, pained voice as he leaned against the wall.

"Hold him there, Jotetsu!" Shohi said, kneeling beside the struggling man and placing his hand on his mask. "Now, show me *your* face."

Shohi ripped the mask away and sent it clattering to the floor. The man, who had been struggling, suddenly froze. With heaving breaths, he looked up at Shohi and Jotetsu.

"Well well! I think what's important here is that you seem to be in perfect health, Your Majesty," the man quipped.

Shohi's response was calm and quiet.

"I can't believe you sided with the Ho House...Keiyu."

Jin Keiyu, Minister of Rites, merely responded with a smirk.



“So he was Mars? Our calamitous planet?” Hakurei said, leaning against the wall in apparent pain and staring at the ceiling with a furrowed brow. The eunuch’s voice was ragged.

“When did you start conspiring with the Ho House?” Shohi asked coldly as he glared at the restrained minister.

“That’s a good question. Around when Ho Neison was run out of office, I suppose? Seeing that old man looking crushed as he fled the palace...I just couldn’t help wanting to involve myself. The scent of his despair was just too delicious.”

“That long ago?!” Shohi exclaimed.

Jotetsu dragged Keiyu off the floor and wrenched the traitor’s arms behind his back. He then reached into a pouch on his hip and produced a length of rope, which he used to bind Keiyu’s arms.

“Why would you side with the Ho House? Did my father’s rule dissatisfy you that much? Did mine?” Shohi asked.

“Dissatisfy? Oh, by no means! I think history will view everything from the time Chancellor Shu took office as a high point for the empire.”

In contrast to Shohi’s bitterness, Keiyu seemed almost cheerful. One would never guess he had been caught in the act of treason. He was the same flippant Minister of Rites that they had all known.

But that blasé attitude was all the more unnerving. It was bizarre, as if he hadn’t meant any harm at all.

“Then why join forces with the Ho House?” Shohi insisted.

“A high point for the empire is a wonderful thing...but it’s not very interesting,” Keiyu mused.

Suddenly, his expression went blank. Then, as if filling a vacuum, a smile Rimi had never seen appeared on the minister’s face. It was like he was trying to hold back a laugh that was bubbling up from his very core.

“The more chaotic the times, the more amusing the sights, wouldn’t you agree?” Keiyu asked.

Jotetsu's expression turned to disgust, and Shohi narrowed his eyes.

"You think chaos is amusing?" the emperor asked.

"I do. I had hoped to see how you looked when you were cornered, suffering, and in despair. It's a shame really."

"I think you're wasting your time with him, Your Majesty," Jotetsu said disgustedly.

"You say the most hurtful things, Jotetsu!" Keiyu snickered as he looked away with a mock pout.

In the darkness of the antechamber, Rimi clung to the wall and stared unblinkingly at Keiyu.

Is this who he really is? People like him exist?

Rimi couldn't make sense of a word that Keiyu was saying. It was like she was listening to some horrible, frightful demon.

"When the war is over, we'll have plenty of time to hear about his crimes. For now, put him in a cell," Shohi ordered, standing and looking down at the bound, kneeling Keiyu.

"If you're still alive when the war is over, then I'll happily share them," Keiyu replied with a fearless laugh.

"Always have to have the last word, eh, Minister? Do us a favor and shut up," Jotetsu said. Keiyu hissed in pain as the spy dragged him to his feet with a violent wrench of the arm. "I'll hand him over to Kojin and the others."

The room was in a miserable state. The bed was a mess, chairs had been toppled, and the splinters of the false wall were strewn everywhere. Shohi stood amidst the chaos, while Hakurei sat against the wall. Both of them looked relieved, as if they had survived a storm.

Rimi slowly tottered out of the darkened antechamber.

So the Minister of Rites was working with the Ho House... Ah, that explains things then.

When Kojin had announced his resignation and left the palace, Shusei had

quickly learned about it. Only so many people had been present for the chancellor's departure, and despite everyone there having been sworn to silence, Shusei had found out immediately. Keiyu must have been the one to tell him.

When Shohi noticed Rimi emerging from the darkness, his eyes widened.

"Rimi!"

Her vision began to blur at the sound of his voice. From the moment she'd heard the emperor had fallen into a coma, fear and worry had tormented her. Instantly, all that dread left her. The sheer relief brought the consort to tears.

"Your Majesty...you're okay!"

"I know I worried you, but this was the only way to draw out the mole. I'm sorry," Shohi said as he gazed at Rimi with clear, bright eyes. His gait was steady as he approached her.

"Your Majesty, your eyes!" Rimi exclaimed.

Shohi hadn't been able to see well enough to walk without relying on Jotetsu or Hakurei's shoulder for aid. But now, he walked confidently without anyone's assistance.

When he neared, Shohi reached out to clasp Rimi's right hand between his own hands. The emperor's hands were warm as they encompassed hers, and none of his fingers showed any signs of trembling.

"And your fingers..."

But Shohi shook his head.

"I'm sorry. My vision, my fingers, all of it was an act. I'll admit, collapsing on the wall today was real. But that was just exhaustion and nerves," the emperor explained. "When I woke up after being brought here, Hakurei told me he'd seen this as an opportunity and was going to say I was in a coma. He believed if we didn't flush out the spy before tomorrow's critical battle, it would be impossible to tell what might happen."

"It was an act? All of it?" Rimi asked.

When Shohi had complained that his eyes weren't working properly and his

fingers were numb, the doctor who had examined him seemed confused. He had no idea what could've been causing it. That made perfect sense now. Nothing was causing it. There was nothing wrong with him.

"Hakurei came up with a plan to flush out the mole. The night I returned to the palace, he came and explained it to me in secret," Shohi continued.

Rimi did remember that night. The emperor had slipped out of bed near dawn. He must have been meeting with Hakurei.

"As he'd suggested, I began to act as if I was being poisoned. I think Jotetsu caught on to me though. When he would guide me around, he'd constantly ask how my eyesight was," Shohi explained. "Still, the plan worked. Hakurei's a brilliant man."

The emperor turned to Hakurei, and Rimi looked at him as well. He was still sitting against the wall, face turned to the ceiling and eyes closed. His skin was as white as a sheet of paper.

"Master Hakurei?!"

"Hakurei!"

Shohi and Rimi rushed over to him. Shohi grabbed Hakurei's shoulders and began to shake him.

"Hakurei!" he shouted.

The director's head flopped forward against Shohi.

"Call a doctor, now! Something's wrong with him!" Shohi shouted as he worriedly held his brother's body.

Rimi dashed out the door.

III

In a room with a burning brazier, a cold, wet wind suddenly cut through the air.

Minister of Revenue To Rihan, who was slumped over a table and napping, suddenly looked up to see Keiyu standing in the open doorway. Rihan groggily

wondered where his fellow minister had been. The man was so blithe about everything; he was probably trying to seduce some palace women, even during an emergency like this.

But for some reason, Keiyu had his hands bound behind his back and was being escorted by a very serious-looking Jotetsu.

“What is this?” Rihan asked as he rose to his feet.

Renka seemed to sense the commotion as she sat up from the sofa where she was dozing. Her eyes went wide.

Kojin, who’d been deep in thought by the window, suddenly looked as if he’d swallowed something horribly bitter.

Jotetsu gave Keiyu a shove before kneeling.

“We have our Ho mole. Apparently, he’s been going by the name ‘Mars.’”

Renka shook her head in disgust and stared at the ceiling.

“I’d guessed it was someone close to His Majesty, but this? Talk about a parasite,” she commented.

Kojin simply stared at Keiyu.

“What the hell are you talking about, Jotetsu?” Rihan asked, frowning.

“Keiyu? A mole? Don’t be ridiculous. And you, Keiyu! What did you do to land yourself in this mess?”

“A misunderstanding. It’s all a big misunderstanding!” Keiyu exclaimed, looking back with his characteristic grin.

“This is no misunderstanding, Keiyu,” Kojin said softly.

“What are you saying, Chancellor Shu?” Rihan asked, turning back to face Kojin in surprise.

“If you don’t believe it, feel free to ask His Majesty, Hakurei, or Rimi. I’ve got to get back to His Majesty. Thanks to this bastard, they probably don’t know what to do with themselves. I have to be there for them,” Jotetsu said. He turned and looked intently at Renka. “You were worried about a mole, and now you have him. I know it’s hard to believe, but don’t let anybody untie this guy.”

“Yeah. We’ll keep him tied up,” she replied.

Jotetsu glared at Keiyu for a moment before turning and disappearing into the darkness.

“What the hell did you get yourself into, you idiot?” Rihan asked, rushing over to kneel by Keiyu so he could untie his fellow minister.

“Don’t touch that rope, Rihan!” Kojin barked.

“Why not? All of this talk about him being a mole is ridiculous!”

“Is it? I haven’t heard him try to deny it,” Renka said coldly.

Rihan’s eyes widened, and he looked back at Keiyu. The man had his usual grin...but was this really the time to be playing the fool? Keiyu would know better than that, yet he just kept smiling.

“Keiyu?” Rihan asked. He was finally starting to realize something strange was going on. “What’s this about? Why would they say you’re a mole?”

It was impossible. He came from a good house and had been given an important position by the emperor. There was no reason for him to be dissatisfied with things. The minister had nothing to gain from becoming an informant. He didn’t hold any grudges against Shohi or Kojin, nor was he beholden to the Ho House.

And yet...

Personal gain, hatred, debt...those are all understandable reasons. Could there be something else?

Rihan’s strong insight had made him Minister of Revenue, and that insight suddenly gave him the answer. He looked at Keiyu.

Ever since our student days, he had the strangest tendency to laugh at pandemonium.

A colleague had tried to commit suicide while others tried desperately to stop him. Keiyu had watched it all and burst into uncontrollable laughter. He’d said it was funny.

“Funny.” I just thought he was a problem child, but...

As Rihan watched Keiyu grin, a chill of fear made him grow tense.



Jotetsu returned from escorting Keiyu to Kojin and the others around the same time Rimi brought the doctor.

Upon Shohi's order, Jotetsu picked Hakurei up and laid him on the bed. The doctor checked his pulse. When he began to check the eunuch's eyes, Hakurei awoke. He blinked a few times, looked at the doctor, and then looked around the room.

"Forgive me, it appears I lost consciousness," Hakurei said weakly. He attempted to sit up, but the doctor held him down.

"It's best that you rest, Director. Your body is in poor shape and showing signs of poisoning," the doctor explained.

At the word "poisoning," Shohi jerked to attention.

"Let us discuss that at length some other time," Hakurei said, trying to play it off with a smile.

"I demand to discuss it now! What do you mean, 'poisoning'?!" Shohi asked, turning to the doctor.

Hakurei raised a hand and gestured at the physician, imploring him not to speak. But the doctor withered under Shohi's glare. After looking back and forth between the emperor and the director, he eventually gave a defeated shake of his head and submitted to Shohi's overwhelming pressure.

"I suspect the director's condition is due to poison. Only he could say for certain, but from the movement of his eyes, I believe he has only the barest of eyesight, and his fingers are shaking slightly," the doctor explained. "I also heard he fainted after being thrown into a wall. My assumption is that his nervous system was unable to handle the burden of the shock, so he fell into a convulsive state. The poison appears to have an effect on the nerves."

"Hakurei, you told me to act as if I couldn't see. To drop things like spoons and chopsticks as if my fingers were numb. You said we needed to show the mole that the poison was working. That it would make them believe you were using the poison on me," Shohi said, his voice shaking as he stared in a daze at

his brother. “So tell me why you have all those symptoms.”

“I’ll happily explain everything when the war is over. But until then—”

“Tell me now!”

Shohi grabbed Hakurei by the collar as the eunuch tried to sit up. The doctor panicked and attempted to separate the two, but Shohi shoved him away.

“Tell me, Hakurei! Why are you showing symptoms of poisoning?!”

“As I said, I can tell you later, after—”

“I order you to tell me!”

Hakurei sighed and looked down, apparently succumbing to Shohi’s assault.

“Because I was poisoning myself,” Hakurei admitted.

Rimi was dumbfounded. Everyone in the room seemed to feel the same way. Even the doctor’s mouth hung open. Jotetsu’s expression contorted in pain, and Shohi looked as if he was too shocked to process the news.

“Yourself? You did? You poisoned... Why?” Shohi asked, his thoughts coming out disconnected and jumbled.

“Because I didn’t know what sort of poison Mars had given me,” Hakurei explained nonchalantly. “But if someone were to take the poison and observe the symptoms, it would be possible to make Mars believe I was using the poison on you.”

The eunuch smiled faintly.

“Since he never told me what it was, I turned that lack of knowledge against him and made him feel confident that I was poisoning you. He was caught by his own trick.”

“Fine, but that didn’t mean you had to poison yourself!” Shohi shouted, eyes wild.

“I had considered using it on condemned prisoners. But I couldn’t afford to take the time to find a prisoner who’d done something heinous enough to warrant being experimented on,” Hakurei explained. “Besides, Mars would’ve noticed something like that. I’d assumed he was someone within the palace.

Likely someone close to you. So I had no choice but to test the poison on myself. From the way Mars spoke, I suspected it wasn't a quick-acting poison, so I assumed it was a viable choice."

"I'd had a feeling there was something off about how you were moving. That explains it," Jotetsu grumbled.

That's right! Master Jotetsu did say there was something strange about Master Hakurei.

If the director's eyesight was suffering and his body was growing numb, Jotetsu had likely been able to tell something was off. As a spy, he had a keen sense of insight. He would've been able to tell there was something unnatural about Hakurei's movement.

And every time we asked for Master Hakurei's help with the research...

Every time they had asked for help, he'd come up with some excuse. He probably wasn't able to read with his diminished eyesight. He must've already been suffering from the poison.

"But I could stop once I was certain of the symptoms. The moment I had an idea of what the poison did, I stopped taking it," Hakurei said in his own defense.

Shohi's fists, which gripped the eunuch's collar, trembled with rage. Hakurei was looking down at those hands, but his eyes looked like they couldn't focus. Only now that his condition was clear could Rimi tell. He'd been that good at hiding the truth. He'd suffered many hardships as he'd gone from boy prince to eunuch and must have learned many ways to hide things from people.

"Director, I need to be clear about this. You cannot heal from a poison that causes nerve damage," the doctor said sternly.

"I know," Hakurei said with a nod. "I stopped taking it, so it didn't get any worse. But I'm going to stay like this, aren't I?"

"I can't believe you'd do that knowing the consequences..." The doctor sighed and shook his head. He then gave a deep bow to the emperor. "Your Majesty, there is nothing I can do for him. All I can suggest is allowing the director to rest."

As the doctor gave Hakurei a final glance before leaving, there seemed to be a mixture of horror and respect for the man in his eyes.

Jotetsu leaned against the wall and crossed his arms.

“So, you wouldn’t even fill me in on this plan, huh?” the spy asked.

“The fewer people who know a secret, the better. Wouldn’t you agree?” Hakurei asked with a sidelong glance in the direction of Jotetsu’s voice. Even with his eyesight as weak as it was, he was able to make little actions such as that to keep up appearances. It was impressive.

“However, we ran into a bit of trouble when Chancellor Shu started talking about producing an heir. An outright refusal would’ve seemed suspicious, so I decided Consort Ho was the only one we could turn to,” Hakurei admitted. “I explained the truth of His Majesty’s situation to her, that he was not yet considering an heir, but we wanted her to pretend to spend the night with him. It was a rude thing to ask, but she understood. Rimi was out of the question. She isn’t the best liar.”

Rimi put a hand on her cheek in thought. It was true; once she heard Shohi was actually in good health, she never would have been able to hide her relief. And of the four consorts, Ho was easily the best at hiding her true feelings.

So Ho knew...

For a concubine, receiving a visit from the emperor was a great honor, but this had all been for the sake of an illusion. Being used like that could potentially feel humiliating, but Ho had accepted the duty, all for the emperor’s sake. Had they simply passed their time in the Palace of Great Purity’s bedroom by sharing tea?

“Ha! Is that right? And this whole plan was built on the idea of you poisoning yourself? Which you wouldn’t even share with His Majesty? No, you could never say you were thinking of doing something so idiotic. His Majesty would never allow it. Lying little fox,” Jotetsu said, his tone growing harder with each word. Hakurei putting himself in danger seemed to enrage the spy.

Shohi, with his brother’s collar still gripped in his fists, bit his lip. He seemed to be doing everything to keep from screaming.

"I never lied. I just didn't tell the whole truth," Hakurei said, trying to soothe the emperor's anger.

"You love to twist words, don't you? You're a damn fool."

Hakurei's expression hardened at his brother's reproachful tone.

"I understand what you're saying, but I don't believe there's anything foolish about what I've done. The spy has been revealed. It was dangerous to have an informant so close to you," Hakurei calmly explained. "Unearthing a mole who's been concealing himself for so long is no easy task. If we let him stay hidden, the enemy would learn our strategies, and it would have affected our chances of victory. And even if we won, he could still jeopardize your rule. He needed to be removed."

Hakurei appeared to be taking a hard stance on the matter, but it just seemed to intensify Shohi's anger.

"And you'd poison yourself for that?!" the emperor shouted.

"Is there a higher calling than protecting you, Your Majesty?"

"Why you...!"

Perhaps Shohi's anger had reached its limits because his voice faltered and his grip tightened.

"Your Majesty!"

Rimi took a step forward to try and get between them, fearing Shohi was about to strike his brother, but just then, the emperor buried his face in Hakurei's chest. The consort gasped and froze in place.

Shohi simply stayed there. Shocked, Hakurei looked down at his brother.

"You're such a fool..." Shohi murmured weakly. The sound of falling rain threatened to drown out his shaking voice. "Why? Why do you always sacrifice so much for me? Why would Heaven do this?"

Hakurei gently smiled, his amber eyes brimming with kindness.

"It's a mistake to blame Heaven. This wasn't Heaven's doing. I wanted this, and I take pride in the fact that it was my choice, not some preordained fate,"

Hakurei said.

“Why would you want something like this?”

“Perhaps this will make you angry,” Hakurei said softly, “but you are my little brother.”

The eunuch wrapped his arms around Shohi and lightly caressed his back. His fingers trembled as he did, an effect of the poison. Rimi had never noticed the shaking, likely because he’d always hidden his hands in his sleeves. But there was no need for him to hide anymore.

Shohi suddenly seemed like a little boy looking for affection. He had been unloved by his mother and abandoned in the rear palace, but he had finally been reunited with his brother.

The air was filled with the sound of falling rain and the damp scent of the autumn night.

The emperor’s shoulders trembled. Hakurei leaned close and whispered something in his brother’s ear. Reading his lips, Rimi believed she could make out what he’d said:

Don’t cry.

Shohi petulantly shook his head. Hakurei looked a bit exasperated but also happy. Rimi felt like she could hear Shohi faintly say, “brother.”

Jotetsu averted his gaze and seemed to pretend that he couldn’t hear any of it. He walked to the open doorway and looked out into the darkness. Rimi joined him, watching the raindrops fall from the eaves above.

Light slipped from the room onto the garden. Purple bellflowers stood out against the dark, slick with rain and their petals softly closed. They looked so beautiful as they surrendered their slender shapes to the gentle drizzle.

Hakurei likely sensed Jotetsu and Rimi’s discretion amidst the quiet of the moment. As Shohi wept, the eunuch began to rock him back and forth.

What am I going to do with you, my crybaby of a brother? he seemed to say.



Chapter 7: The Awaited Dawn

I

After a while, Kojin, Renka, and Rihan arrived at the room where Hakurei was resting. He was sitting on the emperor's bed but hadn't settled in. He probably thought it would be presumptuous to sleep in his master's bed as if it were his own.

The director said he was fine and tried to get up, but Shohi forced him back down. It seemed the emperor was worried for his brother's health.

Shohi had stayed beside the bed, but with Jotetsu and Rimi's assistance, had changed and eaten, so he appeared rather calm.

The chancellor and ministers still seemed to be reeling from the shock of Keiyu being a mole. After all, he had been Rihan's friend since their student days and one of Kojin's most trusted men. Still, true to their positions as chancellor and ministers of Konkoku, they kept their composure.

"Forgive us, Your Majesty. We failed to notice the secret dealings of the Minister of Rites," Kojin said. All three of them kneeled.

"There's no need to apologize. Stand," Shohi ordered. "If you noticed nothing strange, it's because he was like that from the start. Besides, according to him, he was in it for the amusement. If that's the case, he wouldn't have been acting at all like your typical spy. It would've been difficult to notice."

"The amusement? He actually said that?" Rihan asked, raising his head.

"He did."

"Damn him..." Rihan grumbled. From his expression, he looked pained and deeply confused.

"What did you end up doing with him?" Shohi asked.

"We threw him in a cell here in the rear palace," Renka spat. "He's been

obedient, but he hasn't said a word. He just has the same old grin."

"I've known him since we were both students, but I was never able to figure out what he was thinking," Rihan said, face twisting into a frown.

"As I said, a man like that is hard to read. Don't let it get to you," Shohi said.

As Kojin approached the bed, Hakurei seemed to sense his presence and tried to stand.

"Just be still, Hakurei," the emperor said.

"Easier said than done," Hakurei responded with some dismay.

"Do as His Majesty says," Kojin said, coming to stand beside the bed.

"Director, I want to offer my appreciation and respect for your actions."

With that, the chancellor bowed. Kojin was probably blaming himself, believing he should've been the one to unearth the mole. His expression was a mixture of gratitude for Hakurei and irritation at his own ineptitude.

Hakurei continued looking in Kojin's direction for a while, but he seemed to eventually realize that the chancellor was bowing to him. The eunuch's expression turned to shock.

"I'm not worthy of your gratitude, Chancellor. I simply did the natural thing," Hakurei said faintly and smiled.

Kojin raised his head and looked at Hakurei's beautiful, unfocused eyes.

Shohi heaved a sigh and stood up from his chair.

"I'm glad the matter with Keiyu is resolved, but we need to decide our strategy for tomorrow. How will the enemy approach, and how should we respond?" the emperor asked.

"Now that the prefectural armies have entered the palace, there's a strong chance the enemy will attack from all sides. They shouldn't be expecting more reinforcements to arrive," Renka explained matter-of-factly.

"We're still expecting reinforcements from Bun and Kyo. Hopefully, Saisakoku as well. Whatever the case, I don't expect any of them to make it by morning," Shohi said as he stared at the ceiling.

The prefectures of Bun and Kyo were farther from the capital than the other three. Crossing their borders also meant dealing with tall mountains and traversing deep rivers. It was doubtful they'd be only a day behind the other armies. More likely, it would be several days at least. Saisakoku was the same. Even in the best of cases, it would be days before they could expect those troops to arrive.

The palace was now besieged with thirty thousand men inside. The new troops meant that the defense would be easier, but Rimi could see they'd brought a new, large problem with them. Kojin recognized it as well and beat her to the punch.

"Rihan, how much food does the palace have?" the chancellor asked.

"I'd say we'll run out in two days," Rihan answered.

"What about the rear palace's stockpiles? Director, do you have a guess?"

"By my estimation, the rear palace can only support about two thousand men through the night," Hakurei answered. "Would you agree, Rimi? You've been helping out in Food Services."

"Yes, I'd say Master Hakurei is correct," Rimi replied.

"So you're saying we need to win this war fast and hard too?" Jotetsu asked bitterly.

"Carrying on with the siege would only work if we were expecting a huge number of reinforcements, but we can only expect another ten thousand or so. That isn't enough to crush the enemy from the outside. Without a bigger force, holding this siege will just turn us into trapped rats. We'll be suffocated," Renka spelled out bluntly.

"Holding the palace was never a winning strategy to begin with," Kojin added. "We never planned on carrying through with a siege. That's why we spent those ten days bolstering the defenses rather than stocking the palace with food."

"Are you saying we're going to retreat?" Shohi asked.

Kojin nodded.

"Our enemy began with thirty thousand troops, but they lost many of them in

today's attack. Meanwhile, we've been reinforced with thirty thousand fresh troops. A head-on strike could shatter them. Even if we can't break the enemy, we can get you to Ju or Tei where you'll be surrounded by allies. Then, we can plan a counter-strike."

"What are the odds that the enemy has more than thirty thousand men? If they outnumber us, we'll be at a disadvantage, won't we?" Shohi asked.

"You're correct," Kojin grumbled. "What we know for certain is that the chief general leads Annei's imperial garrison, which numbers thirty-two thousand men. We don't have any reason to believe they have more than that. But as you mentioned, there's a possibility they have troops we haven't accounted for. Remember, our enemy is Ho Shusei.

"But while Shusei is definitely a shrewd man, we can't afford to take our time deciding," Kojin continued, his tone firm. "Giving the enemy time to regroup from today's losses is a bad strategy. And if we let our troops weaken, then even if we do fight with equal numbers, we'll be at a disadvantage. A single day without food can create a clear difference in combat ability."

Rimi didn't know much about warfare, so she was lost amidst all the strategic discussion. But one thing seemed clear to her. If they were going to fight their way out of the palace, the coming morning would be their only chance. Considering the food situation, a long siege was impossible. As Renka had said, staying in the palace without the expectation of a massive reinforcing army would be suicidal.

Shohi turned his gaze outside and thought in silence for a while. He closed his eyes, as if listening to the raindrops as they fell from the eaves. Eventually, he opened his eyes again and turned to Kojin.

"It's clear we only have one way forward. With Shusei as our enemy, that path is dangerous. But staying in the palace with no further strategy is not an option. If we have a chance of victory now, then we need to seize it. Understood?"

Kojin, Renka, and Rihan each met Shohi's gaze. From their expressions, each gave a clear vote of approval.

"Tomorrow morning, our entire army will leave the palace. Prepare horses

and carriages so we can get the four consorts, the palace women, and the eunuchs to safety,” Shohi ordered.

“I approve,” Kojin said. “I believe we should have the entire army push out from the north. The enemy will be unable to know for certain whether we’ll hold the siege or attack, so they’ll likely spread their troops evenly around the palace. With an overwhelming advantage in numbers, I believe we’ll be able to penetrate their defenses, go around Mount Bi, and cross the wasteland to the Red River. If we follow the riverbanks north, we’ll be near Ju.”

Shohi’s expression hardened.

“Kojin, Renka, Rihan. Prepare to set out at first light,” the emperor commanded.

The chancellor and ministers bowed and departed. After working out a more detailed plan, they would brief the soldiers and make preparations to leave.

The escape would already be difficult, but they also had to make plans to evacuate the bureaucrats, consorts, palace women, and eunuchs.

Hakurei slipped off of the bed, and Shohi turned to scold him. However, the eunuch bowed and spoke before the emperor could complain.

“As director, I can’t afford to lay around in a situation like this. Surely you realize that, Your Majesty?”

“But—”

“The director’s duty is to manage the rear palace. If I don’t prepare things for the women and eunuchs here, who will?” Hakurei said with a sly smile. “Don’t worry, Your Majesty. I can handle it.”

Shohi appeared defenseless in the face of Hakurei’s smile and kind voice. Though he seemed a bit unhappy about it, the emperor nodded his assent.

“I’ll be off then,” Hakurei said before departing.

“Can he really not see?” Jotetsu asked, watching the eunuch depart with admiration. “If he’s able to carry himself like that while just relying on shadows and shapes, that’s impressive.”

“Master Jotetsu, I’m amazed you could tell there was something strange

about his movements,” Rimi said.

Nobody else had noticed anything, but Jotetsu had said he’d felt something was off. It was extraordinary.

“That guy’s always been a little unsteady on his feet, so I’m not surprised nobody noticed. But when you’ve been trained in martial arts, you notice when people change the way they move. Those kinds of deeply ingrained habits don’t change unless there’s something wrong with your body,” Jotetsu explained. “Anyway, the fox seems eager to get to work. I suppose I should do my job too.”

The spy turned to Shohi and bowed.

“Your Majesty, I’m going to see Kyo Kunki,” he continued. “He and I need to decide where you’re needed and how we’re going to protect you when we push out tomorrow.”

“Good. Take care of it,” Shohi ordered.

Jotetsu answered him with a confident grin before leaving.

As the room grew quiet, the sound of raindrops seemed to grow louder, filling the space.

Tomorrow, even the four consorts will have to leave the palace walls.

The distant sounds of war had been enough to make Rimi tremble. She could only imagine how terrifying it would be to set out onto a battlefield. But cowering in the rear palace would cost them their lives. The consort needed to steel herself.

Shohi, apparently reading the tension on Rimi’s face, approached her. He placed a hand on her cheek.

“Are you scared?” he asked.

“Honestly...a bit. But we can’t hesitate right now,” Rimi replied. “We’re all going with you. When the war is all over, I just want to have a nice cup of tea with the four consorts.”

“‘When the war is over,’ eh?” Shohi asked. He stared intensely into Rimi’s eyes as if he could see something there.

“Your Majesty?”

“I’ve been pondering something since before the fighting broke out. When the war is over, I believe we need to rethink your position.”

Rimi tilted her head curiously. She wanted to ask what he meant, but the emperor seemed to be thinking hard about something, so she stayed silent.

“I chose you as my empress because I wanted you. Even now, I love you. The way you smile when you cook makes me so happy. But I’m beginning to think that doesn’t have to go hand in hand with you being empress,” Shohi explained. “I’m starting to wonder if I made a mistake in wanting to wed you. It’s lucky we haven’t completed the enthronement ceremony yet. I’d like to fix things.”

He wanted to rethink her position as empress-to-be. In other words, he didn’t want her as his empress?

Rimi was a bit shocked...yet not surprised.

When Kojin had brought up the idea of producing an heir, Shohi had said he couldn’t imagine having a child with Rimi. Perhaps that was his way of keeping her away from his scheme, but after saying it, he’d seemed puzzled himself. If it had actually just been a convenient thing to say, it shouldn’t have affected him in that way.

The more His Majesty thinks and learns about himself, the more he grows as a person.

As the emperor reflected on the nature of his attachment to Rimi, he seemed to have realized something was wrong and now wanted to fix it. There was something emboldened about him, like a young sapling growing strong in summer.

“I understand, Your Majesty,” Rimi said, unable to keep from smiling.

“Why are you smiling? The idea of losing your position doesn’t concern you?” the emperor asked.

“It’s strange, but no. Not at all. I trust you.” Suddenly, Rimi’s stomach groaned loudly. She placed her hands on her belly to quiet it in embarrassment. “Ah! I’m sorry! Now that I think about it, I haven’t eaten since lunch.”

“We strike out at dawn. You should eat something,” Shohi said. He grinned and patted her cheek. “Go.”

The warmth of his palm felt like it embraced her in calm security, embodying the feeling of her complete trust in him.

As Rimi headed down the walkway leading to the kitchen, she saw the four consorts running toward her. They were moving unusually quickly with none of their usual focus on keeping up appearances. There was no word for their expressions. They bordered somewhere between happiness and anger.

“Lady Setsu! We just heard from Hakurei! His Majesty is awake?!” On asked breathlessly with a smile.

“Who cares if he’s awake! You’re telling me he was faking?!” So asked angrily, pushing past On. “How could he do something so awful?! We’ve lost years of our lives worrying about him!”

“I have to give him a piece of my mind!” Yo shouted, waving her fist in the air.

Ho, who’d been following the other three from behind, smiled weakly.

“Come on, go easy on him. Like Hakurei and I said, there were extenuating circumstances,” the Virtuous Consort said.

The other three all turned back and fired a sharp glare at Ho.

“Oh, you’ll have your turn!” they cried out in unison.

Ho winced, and Rimi gave her a sympathetic look. She then offered a bow to the other three consorts.

“I was tricked as well. Please, say something on my account too.”

That seemed to embolden the angry consorts, who puffed out their chests and charged forward.

“His Majesty will just have to take their tongue-lashing in stride. I’ll have to do the same, I suppose,” Ho said with a resigned shake of her head.

“So you knew about Master Hakurei?” Rimi asked.

“Yes. He said there was no one else he could think of to rely on. When I heard what he was doing and saw the state he was in, I decided to help,” Ho

explained. "I can't believe he'd do something so idiotic. His career will suffer for it. *He'll* suffer for it, I'm sure."

Rimi could see the pain in Ho's eyes.

"You're not angry with Master Hakurei anymore?" she asked.

"Angry? Far from it," Ho answered with a sudden smile. She leaned in close to whisper in Rimi's ear. "I love him."

Rimi looked at Ho in shock, but the Virtuous Consort simply replied with a smile, brimming with pride before casually walking away.

Despite her fear of what the morning would bring, Rimi felt as if a warm flame had been lit within her heart.

To think things like this are happening now of all times. No, I suppose these are the sorts of times when everything starts to happen.

Rimi could tell her own fate was starting to shift as well.

II

When the war was over, Rimi would no longer be a candidate for empress. Yet for some reason, she didn't feel the sense of unease she'd had during Aisha's visit.

After arriving at the Palace of Northern Peaks's kitchen, Rimi lit the oil lanterns placed in hollows within the kitchen pillars. As she approached a stove, she found that it still had some live embers. She worked to build them into a fire, then crouched in front of the stove to idly watch the flames slowly grow.

I'm not going to be empress. I don't know where I'll end up. Still, I feel calm.

Perhaps the consort had changed somehow too.

"Oh? It seems I'm not the first one here," Hakurei called from the kitchen entrance.

Rimi turned around to see the eunuch with a hand against one of the kitchen pillars. As he walked toward Rimi with his usual swaying gait, she could see him run his hands along pillars, walls, and tables to check where he was. He must

have gotten around like that ever since the poison had started to affect his eyesight but simply had such an elegant way of doing it that nobody had noticed.

“Master Hakurei? What are you doing in the kitchen?”

“Not looking for the Quinary Dragon, I assure you,” he quipped. “I just wanted something to eat.”

Their first meeting had been in a kitchen. At the time, Hakurei had been searching for the Quinary Dragon, who’d escaped him.

“I’m hungry too. I was thinking of making some porridge,” Rimi said.

“Is that right? Shall I make you some, then?”

“You?!” Rimi exclaimed, her eyes widening in surprise.

“Since becoming a eunuch, I’ve had to come to the kitchen on occasion. I can handle making some porridge.”

“But—”

Hakurei approached Rimi and interrupted her by gently placing his hand on her shoulder.

“You do nothing but cook for others. Someone should cook for you once in a while,” he said.

Rimi had never even considered having someone else cook for her. But now that she thought about it, she didn’t have much experience getting to indulge in food prepared by others. She wanted to try eating something Hakurei made. The consort wondered how it would taste.

“Are you sure? You don’t mind?” she asked.

“Go sit at a table and wait,” he replied.

Apparently, all Hakurei could really see were vague shapes. Even so, he managed to use his slender fingers to effortlessly identify ingredients and utensils. Sure enough, he seemed familiar with the kitchen.

Hakurei procured dried scallops from the storeroom, which he soaked in water. He washed some rice and put it in a pot along with the scallops in the

same water he'd used to rehydrate them. The pot bubbled. He added a pinch of salt and removed the pot from the stove. It was an extremely simple method of preparing porridge, but he seemed skilled at it.

The eunuch brought the pot to Rimi's table and filled a bowl for her. He laid a spoon alongside her bowl.

"Enjoy," he said.



While Hakurei prepared a bowl for himself, Rimi complied by picking up her spoon. The steamy scent of scallops wafted from the bowl. She scooped some up and eagerly took a bite. The rich, perfectly salted flavor of scallops filled her mouth. As the porridge warmed her throat and settled in her belly, the consort was filled with indescribable satisfaction.

"It's delicious," she sighed.

"I'm glad it suits your palate," Hakurei said with a smile.

Master Hakurei made this.

The idea that he'd cooked this for her specifically made Rimi feel unimaginably happy. The work he'd put into it echoed in her breast, causing it to seem so much tastier than if she'd made the same thing for herself.

I guess the flavor changes depending on who creates it, which makes it taste even better. Flavor isn't just about using fancy ingredients or cooking styles.

She'd always known that, but just like the porridge filling her stomach, the feeling permeated her whole body.

Ah, I see.

Rimi suddenly realized something: the reason why she wasn't worried about losing her position.

It's kind of like flavor.

Rimi wanted a place in the world. When she was secure in the knowledge that she did have one, she felt at ease. When her place was threatened, she felt anxious. She was always looking for some duty to fulfill, whether as the Umashino-Miya, a consort, or the future empress.

But having a place in the world wasn't just about having an important position.

Even with conflict all around her, Rimi had been able to smile time and again. She'd smiled when she'd cooked with the four consorts and when she'd praised Shohi's geyi. It was like what she had mused while she was cooking with the consorts: it wouldn't matter if she was in the rear palace or the middle of the countryside; if she was with them, it would be fun.

I suppose being with someone is what's important.

Even if she didn't have a position of status, if she thought about how she had someone alongside her, she didn't feel worried. Even if she wasn't going to be empress, maybe she could be a handmaid for one of the four consorts. If she ended up as a simple servant in the rear palace, she might be able to work alongside Hakurei. Or she'd wind up working in the kitchen and get to assist Yo Koshin.

Rimi realized now that she felt at ease because she'd surrounded herself with people whose presence made her happy.

So, even if she couldn't stay by Shohi's side as his empress, she'd have a place again if she found someone else to work beside. Rimi was lucky to have people she would be happy to be around.

If Rimi had learned one thing from the people in her life, it was this: there wasn't any point in obsessing over your duties, status, or work regarding where you belong. Your place in the world is alongside others.

Lady Saigu.

As Rimi brought another bite of porridge to her mouth, she reflected on how such a simple dish could be so incomparably delicious. While thinking this, she found herself calling out to her sister in distant Wakoku.

How did it take me so long to realize something so obvious? I'm ashamed of myself.

Shohi was thinking, making decisions, and pushing forward. Rimi needed to do some thinking of her own. What would she do next? Whose side would she stay at?

A young cuisinologist suddenly came to mind.

Master Shusei...isn't here anymore.

Rimi wondered how happy she might have been if she could've spent her whole life as the kind cuisinologist's assistant.



After spending a fair amount of time unloading their complaints on Shohi, the

four consorts were satisfied. Truthfully, they were just relieved to see the emperor was well. Complaining was mostly just an excuse for them to have a chance to be by his side. But having received word from Hakurei about the next morning's plan, their only choice was to leave.

In the morning, at the first sign of light, the entire army would strike out through the northern gate. The bureaucrats and everyone from the rear palace would race for the Red River and follow it to Ju.

It was decided that the four consorts and Rimi would share Hakurei's carriage. The handmaids worked frantically to load it with the bare minimum of supplies.

So, Yo, and Ho quickly returned to their palaces and packed. They were going to collect only their most precious possessions, heirloom rings and combs and the like, so they wouldn't be burdened on the road. They would have to work right up until dawn to prepare.

On, however, only packed the food and water her maid collected for her, then spent the rest of her time in the reception hall of the Palace of Northern Peaks, desperately leafing through books. In the flickering candlelight, On and the mountains of books cast shadows against the wall.

Someone in a fabulous ruqun appeared in the doorway. The change in air pressure made the flames grow and waver, causing On's shadow to twist and warp.

"What are you doing in here, On? Are you finished preparing? I just saw your handmaid in tears. She asked me to do something since you apparently aren't getting ready."

It was So. She angrily paced toward On, hands on her hips.

"I'm fine," On replied, only briefly glancing at So. "I have food and water. There's nothing else for me to prepare."

"Why not?"

"My family disowned me, so I don't have any heirlooms to take with me. I don't have any attachment to my clothes and jewelry. Besides, I feel like I'm on the verge of understanding something. Take a look at this book."

On showed So the cover of the book she was holding: *Matters of Ascension*.

“It seems to be a collection of ritual details surrounding ascension to the throne. It goes from ancient times up until the second emperor of Konkoku’s reign and sometimes mentions the Quinary Dragon.”

“What does it say about it?” So asked.

“Like this,” On said as she flipped through pages to get back to where she’d finished reading. “It says when the fourth emperor of Shokukoku was ascending to the throne, the Quinary Dragon spoke.”

“Really?”

“It wasn’t a squeak but an actual voice. Someone may have heard the same thing that Lady Setsu says she heard.”

“If it spoke at someone’s ascension, then that has to be a good omen!” So said.

“True. But there’s a problem. His Majesty wasn’t the only one there when it spoke. Rimi said Lord Ho was there too.”

The momentary glimmer of joy in So’s eyes fizzled out.

“So an auspicious sign for someone’s ascension. The question is, who was it speaking about?”

“Exactly,” On said with a nod. “That’s why I’m going to keep reading until the last minute. I want to find some hint toward what the Quinary Dragon really meant.”

“Well then, I’ll help!” So said. The consort told her handmaid, who’d been waiting by the door, to simply focus on getting food and water. Then, she came back and picked up a book. “If there are records of the Quinary Dragon speaking at someone’s ascension, then we should probably focus on books related to that, right?”

“Consort So? No, but you need to get ready. You’re not like me. You’re the Noble Consort! You’re from an important house. You must have all sorts of important heirlooms!”

“Who cares about those trinkets? If the enemy wants them, they can have

them,” So replied, turning up her nose and taking a seat beside her fellow consort.

As So began to look over her book, Ho and Yo arrived. They had evidently heard from the handmaids that On and So had begun reading.

“Who said you could start without us?” Yo pouted as she entered.

“As if you can read?” So snorted.

“That doesn’t mean I want to be left out!”

“I heard you found out we should be focusing on books about ascension. I’m impressed, On,” Ho commented with a slim smile as she reached for a book.

“I just wish I had figured it out sooner,” On said apologetically. Ho gently patted her shoulder.

“You’re too humble. You’re allowed to show a little pride.”

On smiled bashfully.



“Tomorrow morning, everyone here will set out with the army. You’ll be coming with us, Keiyu,” Rihan explained, kneeling in front of the cell while speaking through the bars.

The director had prepared an impromptu cell where Keiyu now sat against the wall, still bound. He’d done nothing but smile the entire time. He had been staring idly at the ceiling, but now, the minister gave Rihan his attention.

“Your concern is touching, Rihan, but you can go on without me.”

“Who in their right mind would let you go?” Rihan asked, glaring at Keiyu and trying to hold in his boiling anger. “We’re bringing you with us. You’re staying alive until the war is over and His Majesty can pass judgment.”

“Oh my, I’m terrified. You’re truly angry with me?”

“You’ve done nothing but lie to me! And when I look back on it, I realize now it was all you. When Chancellor Shu and His Majesty came into conflict over Setsu Rimi’s kidnapping, you claimed someone left you a message saying Rimi was with Renka. But *you* wrote that message, didn’t you?”

That letter was the reason Shohi had gone to Renka's estate, which was where the emperor had begun to distrust and antagonize his chancellor. Since Keiyu was working with the Ho House, the moment he'd learned of Rimi's whereabouts, he'd used that knowledge to create a divide between Shohi and Kojin.

All so he could disrupt a stable reign.

"Not as if it did much good anyway. I never imagined His Majesty would be able to persuade Chancellor Shu to return. I was so proud of myself for making such a clear divide between them too." Keiyu chuckled.

Rihan slammed his fist against the barrier between them.

"Stop laughing!"

"I'm sorry," Keiyu apologized, adopting his usual grin once more and looking at Rihan, "but I can't help it. When something's funny, I laugh."

"You think it's funny?" Rihan growled.

"It is!"

"You haven't changed since we were students. When Sohei tried killing himself and everyone was trying to stop him, you laughed then too."

"Well, it was funny."

"You honestly find that sort of thing funny?"

"Of course. Everyone crying and running around in circles? It's hilarious."

Rihan growled and clenched his fists.

Truthfully, Keiyu had always been like that, yet Rihan had never thought to ask why he saw things that way. He'd just written the man off as an annoying jester. Rihan had never tried to question his own presumptions.

Maybe it was just laziness. It was easier to not question their friendship. Digging into other people's lives just seemed like such a nuisance.

And this was what he'd earned for his laziness.

"And me? Am I funny? Does seeing me like this make you laugh?" Rihan asked.

“Yes, when you’re angry, you...” Keiyu responded with a grin, but he suddenly trailed off.

The Minister of Revenue, as he glared through the bars, was crying.

Rihan stood up. He couldn’t stop himself from crying. It made him sick, wasting tears on a man like Keiyu. He was full of anger, revulsion, and hate. So why was he crying?

“You’re coming with us. You’re going to be judged,” Rihan said before turning to leave.

Keiyu smirked and called after him.

“Why are you crying?”

Rihan didn’t answer. He couldn’t. He would’ve liked an answer to the question himself.

III

The rain had stopped, but thick clouds still blanketed the sky. Occasionally, a wet, powerful wind cut through the air.

It’s likely only a couple of hours until dawn.

Shusei had returned to the Ho estate. Sitting at the desk in his room, he stared out into the darkness through a nearby open window. It was difficult to see in the faint candlelight, but a white fog had begun to accumulate in the air. The night’s constant rain had soaked into the warm earth and was reemerging as mist. At this time of year, it was common for fog to roll off of the Red River and envelop Annei as well.

In all likelihood, it would be a foggy morning.

He returned his attention to the papers spread out on his desk. The chief general and others had been there until late into the night working out the following morning’s plan of attack.

The prefectural armies that had appeared from the north hadn’t attacked the Ho House’s main force. However, they had crushed the token force that had

been left near Mount Bi. The emperor now likely believed he had forces equivalent to the Ho House.

There's no way they'll try to hold the siege now.

It would take a month to assemble enough reinforcements to fully outnumber the Ho House's troops, and the palace didn't have enough supplies to support thirty thousand men for that long. They would definitely try to strike out while their reinforcements were fresh. And if they planned on leaving the palace, it would have to be the following morning. Shusei could tell that much, so Kojin certainly thought the same.

If both sides recognized that the following morning would be the decisive moment, it raised a question: what would Kojin's plan of attack be?

There were two options: they would either push out from all directions at once or focus their forces in a single direction.

A focused strike was the more likely scenario. In that case, it would probably be directed northward. Kojin would likely assume that they would be able to reach the Red River and follow it north into Ju. With that in mind, it would be best for the Ho House to deploy its main force to the north as well.

However, if they did take up the north and Kojin chose to disperse his forces, far too many of the emperor's men would escape. If Shohi was able to take refuge in Ju with enough of his forces unharmed, he'd be able to eventually recapture the palace and city. With *that* in mind, it may have been better for the Ho House to deploy its troops evenly.

Conflict broke out during the war council; ultimately, Shusei made the decision.

The mercenary forces that the Ho House had employed would be placed to the east, west, and south. Meanwhile, the imperial army making up the bulk of their forces would be deployed to the north. Since the army had lost men during the day's assault, they now numbered below thirty thousand.

"The emperor doesn't know about the six thousand men we've employed. He should believe that our troops are fewer than thirty thousand. They believe they outnumber us, and we can use that to our advantage," Shusei had explained.

“When they see the mercenary forces positioned in the other directions, they’ll believe the northern troops to be fewer than twenty thousand or so. It will make them let down their guard.”

Shusei had looked around and smiled at everyone present.

“We should have a thick fog tomorrow, which will obscure our troop numbers. If we place thirty thousand men along the Red River, the emperor’s forces will walk right into our waiting arms.”

Everyone present had approved of the strategy before departing to ready the troops to deploy along the river.

Now, the Ho House was serene.

From the direction of Ho Neison’s room, Shusei could hear the song of an erhu being played by a courtesan. Neison had come to enjoy listening to the instrument as a lullaby and had apparently ordered courtesans to play for him while he slept. He was an intelligent and educated man with a taste for refinement. But like a man born into a life of royalty, he was indifferent to the suffering of others, especially the common folk.

A damp wind cut through the room, caressing Shusei’s back.

“My lord,” called a man’s voice from the darkness, out of reach of the candle’s light. There had been no sign of his entrance.

“How do things look?” Shusei asked, turning in the man’s direction.

“Getting close, but the fog is slowing things down. Even if we make it by dawn, the fog could keep us from moving,” the spy reported.

“The fog is an unforeseen element. It seems my powers of observation end at the weather. Very well. I understand. Leave me.”

As if melting into the very darkness, the spy disappeared.

“Fog, eh?” Shusei grumbled, turning his focus back out the window.

Natural phenomena were out of the scholar’s hands. Whether the fog would turn out to be a blessing or a curse would depend on fate.

Well, at least we’ll get to see which house Heaven really stands with.

It was ironic. No matter how carefully and systematically one planned, the whims of fate could change things dramatically. Perhaps that was why Heaven's backing was so critical.

Perhaps that was also why the Quinary Dragon had descended from Heaven, so people could know who Heaven truly supported.

Shusei heard a light clatter behind him. Thinking the spy had returned, he turned around. But instead, he was greeted by a small, white creature sitting on the table. It had a long body and silky fur with little paws bearing bird-like talons. Its right paw gripped a number of little pearls. A long mustache drooped from its nose and small twin horns sprouted between its ears. It had big blue eyes.

"Quinary Dragon?"

The dragon flipped its tail back and forth as it stared at Shusei.

"What are you doing here?" Shusei asked.

Unsurprisingly, the dragon didn't answer. Still, it understood human speech, so he assumed the question had gotten through.

"Are you here to condemn me for fighting the emperor tomorrow since Rimi supports him and you love her? For hurting her? Well, no matter how much you condemn me, I'm not going to stop. Forgive me, but I plan on fighting."

The Quinary Dragon gave a small shake of its head. It then nodded twice while looking Shusei directly in the eyes.

The scholar, puzzled at what the dragon was trying to convey, took a step closer. It immediately turned around, jumped off the table, and ran outside.

Shusei raced after the dragon, but by the time he made it outside, it was already running off into the night. Through the fog and the darkness, he could make out a pure-white shape spiraling into the sky.

"'Feel free?' Is that the message?" he mumbled as he watched the dragon disappear.

It had nodded. Perhaps that meant it approved of his actions.

When Shusei returned to his room, he noticed a small, white package sitting

on the table where the dragon had been. Presumably, the Quinary Dragon had left it there.

The package was about the size of Shusei's thumb and was wrapped in paper, twisted at both ends. Something seemed to be inside it.

When the scholar unwrapped the paper, he found a small piece of candy. In the candlelight, he could see it was a translucent amber color. Bits of nuts were encased within.

“Geyi? How nostalgic.”



Shusei remembered making geyi for Shohi when he'd first started serving the emperor. Shohi had a poor appetite, and despite Shusei trying to make all sorts of things for him, most of his offerings weren't received well. Geyi was the one thing that Shohi liked.

But as nostalgic as the memory was, Shusei couldn't work up the urge to eat it. He wrapped the candy back up and placed it on the table.

He wondered why the Quinary Dragon would bring such a thing.

Is this an attempt to make peace? It might mean nothing at all. Whatever the case, I've been told to do as I wish. And if the Quinary Dragon speaks for Heaven, then that means it's Heaven's will.

He felt emboldened. Once more, the scholar swore to see matters through to the end.

My plan will succeed.



Inside the palace, people quietly carried out their work. The earth, muddy from the night's rain, bore countless footprints. Soldiers began to silently amass at the northern gate. Numerous carriages and horsemen worked their way there as well.

Dawn was approaching. Amid the gray twilight, one could see the shapes of people shifting. If the air had been clear, one might have been able to make out their silhouettes more distinctly, but a fog had risen. Outside an arm's length or two of distance, people became vague shapes.

A boxy carriage drawn by four horses was parked outside the Palace of Northern Peaks's front gate. The roof was laden with waterskins and food-filled sacks. It was a plain vehicle with little in the way of ornamentation, but it would carry the four consorts, Rimi, and Hakurei.

The eunuch climbed onto the coachman's bench. After a brief conversation with the driver, he called down to the cabin.

"Is everyone aboard? We're leaving for the northern gate soon."

"Give us a moment. On isn't here yet," Rimi responded anxiously.

“We’re running out of time,” Hakurei urged.

“I’ll go look for her!” Rimi said. But just as she went to get up, she was interrupted by a voice.

“I’m sorry!” On called out as she sprinted for the carriage. She clutched a single book to her chest as she hurried aboard.

With everyone present, Hakurei gave the coachman the order to leave. From the eunuch’s strained voice, it sounded like his shoulders were tense and rigid. He was tightly gripping a sheathed sword in his lap.

“What took you so long? You had us worried!” So chastised.

“I’m sorry! But just before I was about to leave, I found something!” On cried excitedly. She showed the others the book she was clutching.

“What is it?” Yo asked with a perplexed look.

Though they’d opened the carriage’s windows, the interior was still rather dark. Things outside the window were growing slightly clearer, but their vision was obscured by a thick fog, which was as white as milk.

“I found a book called *Interpreting the Gods*. It covers all sorts of phenomena and tries to interpret the will of the gods. It was written by a priest one hundred years ago. It talks about the Quinary Dragon too,” On explained.

The carriage left the walls of the rear palace and headed north. They were surrounded by the crunch of footsteps and could hear the distant neigh of horses. The thick fog made it impossible to see, but from the sound of it, a huge number of men were headed north.

As the carriage left the rear palace, a glance was enough to see how tense the four consorts were. It was unsurprising considering they were about to head into a battlefield. Despite being prepared to run into the enemy, cutting through a war zone was still a terrifying situation.

According to Kojin’s estimation, the worst-case scenario would be the emperor’s forces being evenly matched with the Hos’. The prefectural troops were fresher than the imperial army as well, so their chances of victory were decent.

Even so, they had to be prepared to make sacrifices.

Not just soldiers either. Bureaucrats, consorts, servants, and eunuchs were all at risk. Many defenseless people would probably be attacked.

The carriage containing the four consorts was well-protected. It was in the center of the army's formation with horsemen and unmounted troops surrounding it for protection. Shohi was also on horseback ahead of the carriage, likely flanked by Kyo Kunki and Jotetsu.

In what felt like no time at all, the sky brightened. But even with the improved light, they couldn't see at all, which made the fog seem even thicker.

Someone knocked on the wall of the carriage. Rimi looked out the window to see Shohi riding alongside them.

"We'll be leaving the palace soon. You'll have soldiers everywhere protecting you. Don't worry," he said.

Shohi was clad in armor and carried a helmet under his arm. He seemed to move easily in the armor, which appeared to be lightweight and well-fitted. Dragon heads were affixed to the shoulders, and their bodies stretched down to wrap around the torso, making it seem as if he was encompassed by twin dragons. The gold ornamentation was likely so beautiful because the armor had never been put to use. It had been given to him at his ascension, but emperors had rarely needed to wear armor.

"According to our scouts, the Hos have placed thousands of men to the east, west, and south, with their main forces waiting on the other side of Mount Bi," Shohi explained calmly, perhaps hoping to assuage their worries. "With this fog, we can't be sure of their total numbers, but thanks to the way they've split up their troops, they'll have somewhere over twenty thousand men to stop us. We should have an advantage of anywhere between five and ten thousand men. There's nothing to worry about."

An advantage in the thousands. While there would definitely be losses, it sounded like they would easily be able to break through, make it to the Red River, and travel north into Ju.

"What's more, this fog ought to end up helping us," Shohi added.

As Rimi looked at Shohi's smile, she suddenly felt uneasy.

Fog?

It was obvious that the fog would cause confusion when conflict broke out, but since the emperor's plan wasn't to destroy the enemy, they had an advantage. Even if they met the Ho House's army head-on, hitting in a wedge formation would allow Shohi's forces to break through the enemy line. The thick fog was lucky since it would conceal their formation. While the enemy's forces were divided and confused, the emperor's troops would be able to push past them.

It was only possible because their troops now outnumbered their foe's.

But we can't see what they're doing either.

The fog could hide all sorts of things. The fog that hid Shohi's forces hid the enemy's as well. If it could hide an immense mountain from view, couldn't something be lurking in the mist?

Stop it. You can't think like that.

Rimi shook her head in an attempt to shake the worries away.

Shohi and Kojin were both well aware of the danger. Whatever worries Rimi had, they'd probably already planned for them. Knowing the risks, this was the strategy that they had chosen.

They would definitely win the war. There was absolutely nothing to worry about.

"Best of luck in battle, Your Majesty," the four consorts said and bowed to the emperor. Rimi did likewise.

"When the war is over, make me some youtiao again," Shohi requested with a grin.

The consorts responded with smiles and nods. The emperor then turned his focus to Rimi.

"And I'd like to have the youtiao along with some of your cooking," he said.

"Of course," Rimi said, forcing a smile. Though she couldn't help her worries,

she wasn't going to let them show.

Shohi pulled away from the carriage with Kyo Kunki and Jotetsu riding after him. Kunki gave Rimi a silent nod as they made eye contact, and Jotetsu gave a reassuring wink.

All three of their figures, the master and his two servants, quickly disappeared into the mist.

For a while, the carriage bearing Rimi and the others stopped. The footsteps around them had ceased as well, so the troops had apparently stopped moving. Rimi and the consorts all gripped each others' hands.

The hour was close.

In the thick fog, they couldn't see a thing.

It felt like the fog-blanketed moment of silence was going to stretch on forever, but suddenly, a gong rang so loudly that it seemed to shake the air. As the low, brassy sound rang out, the shrill sound of other gongs rose to answer it.

A battle cry rose around them, as if it were coming from the earth itself. The ground shook as troops began to march.

It's time!

The consorts all squeezed each other harder. The carriage began to sway as it set off. The rumble of the earth, the soldiers' voices, and the fog all felt like they threatened to crush them.

Suddenly, the carriage picked up speed. Rimi squeezed her eyes shut and prayed desperately.

Please. Please protect everyone.

Rimi wasn't entirely sure who she should pray to, so in the end, she decided on the closest thing she had to a god.

Please, Tama!

Tama didn't answer. Who even knew where she was?

With the road ahead blanketed in thick fog, there was no way to see where

they were headed.

Afterword

Hello everyone! Miri Mikawa here. Our story is finally starting to draw to a close. The truth is, I actually tried to end it with this volume, but I just couldn't fit everything in, so it'll end with the next one. I already have the first draft finished. I can't believe we're finally here.

To my editor: sorry for being such a nuisance since summer. I apologize for all the confusion I create, and I'm probably going to keep causing trouble for you. I hope you'll bear with me.

To Kasumi Nagi, my illustrator: Hakurei was absolutely beautiful on the cover of the last volume! I fell head over heels for him. I utterly adore the idea that I get to work with you on one more book. Let's see this out to the end.

To my dear readers: While I can't tell you when exactly the final volume will be out, I hope you'll keep an eye on the Beans Bunko homepage and Twitter. I've actually started tweeting myself. I'd been getting a lot of letters saying it was hard to get information about when things were being published, but I'd been trying to avoid social media because I'm terrible at it. So it'll probably just be a source of information as I won't be tweeting much. Even so, I hope you'll check it out. It'll probably come up if you search for Miri Mikawa online.

So here we are. Ten volumes. I never would've made it this far without you readers. Truly, thank you so much! With just one volume left, I'd love it if you stuck around to see how things unfold.

Miri Mikawa



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Culinary Chronicles of the Court Flower: Volume 10

by Miri Mikawa

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